

Christmas Day Talk

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you've ever played hide-and-seek as a child. Perhaps your mum would close her eyes and count to 20, while you quickly find a place to hide away. And as your mum shouts, ready or not, here I come!

You quickly make your final adjustments. Maybe pulling that cushion slightly tighter over your head. Or maybe making doubly sure that the little corner of that blanket isn't sticking out of the wardrobe door.

Perhaps you really thought your mum wouldn't be able to find you. Or you've played hide-and-seek with a child as a grown-up. But as a grown-up, you have already developed keenly attuned senses and would already have a pretty good idea where they are, even before you finish the count.

Well, Jonah is a little bit like that child, trying to play hide-and-seek with God, thinking he could hide from God when God so obviously sees and knows everything.

So who's Jonah? Well, he's a prophet because Jesus said so, but also because he was recorded in 2 Kings 14, where he was a prophet under the rule of King Jeroboam II in Israel.

[1 : 09] A prophet is supposed to be someone who represents God and someone who communicated God's word to his people. An ambassador or mouthpiece for the word of God, if you like.

And the book of Jonah opens, like many other prophetic books in the Bible, simply that the word of the Lord came to the prophet. So starting from verse 1, Right off the bat, we're told Nineveh was a great city in verse 2.

And from history, we know it was one of the major cities of the ancient empire of Assyria. Assyria, we know, was an up-and-coming world superpower at that time, and a potential threat to Israel's existence.

At that point, they were already infamous for their cruelty, flaying their enemies alive and nailing their severed heads and skins on the city gates, as warnings to future would-be enemies.

In the British Museum in London, there are many incredibly detailed but graphic stone carvings which depict the savage ferocity of the Assyrians. We're also told in verse 2 that God has had enough of her evildoing.

[2 : 33] And Jonah's mission, should he choose to accept it, was to call out God's impending judgment against her. And since Jonah was a prophet for Israel, you'd think he would have thought, God's going to punish Israel's potential enemy.

Yay! I can't wait to tell Nineveh! But in verse 3, Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

The surprise here is that Jonah didn't go to Nineveh, and he didn't call out against it. At least not initially, anyway. But I think we may easily miss this surprise, because for many of us, the story has been familiar ever since childhood.

But if we're not shocked by this, we should be. Because for the Jewish readers back when the book of Jonah was written, they know things don't end well for a prophet if he disobeys God.

How dare Jonah run away! The shock of Jonah's willful disobedience to God highlights two big themes. Firstly, no one can hide from a God who is sovereign over all things.

[3 : 44] Hence my first heading, No one can hide from the sovereign Lord. Although I'm convinced that Jonah is a true story and not merely myth or fiction, it is also cleverly written as a literary analogy for the nation of Israel.

The nation which Jonah was serving as prophet. In a way, the book of Jonah is like a mirror in which Israel sees some ugly truth about themselves.

God desired an obedient prophet who served the people, but Jonah wasn't obedient, and he didn't serve. God desires the kings of Israel to be obedient, and to be a light and a blessing to the nations around them.

But the kings of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, as this phrase was recorded over and over again in 1 and 2 Kings. And if the kings do badly, the nation does badly.

As a result, Israel was no better than the pagan nations around them, and certainly no blessing to them. And so the search for an obedient prophet, a true man of God, didn't become a reality until God sent his own son, Jesus Christ, to earth.

[4 : 59] Isn't that why we just celebrated Christmas? To remind us of the good news that the birth of Jesus brings? See what the Apostle Paul writes from Philippians 2, verse 8.

Jesus took the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus, himself fully God and fully man, the true man of God, the creator of the universe, but humbled himself as a man, and was in perfect obedience to God the Father, even by dying on a cross.

And it's to take on God's wrath upon himself, so that whoever turns to him would not have to endure God's wrath, but enjoy his love. Jesus is the bitter Jonah.

And today, Christians are children of God, and we too are called to obedience and service. We obey God's commands, not because we have to, but because we want to, because he first loved us, and because we love him.

[6 : 13] To obey and to serve means to humble ourselves, and to seek a pattern of life after Jesus, rather than going along with the cultural norm. Instead of living my life my way, and to achieve my own ambitions, it means to live my life God's way.

It means putting others before ourselves. It means telling others of the good news Jesus brings. It means being more like Jesus, less like Jonah.

And we continue in verse 3. Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went to Joppa, which is on the coast by the Mediterranean Sea, 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. We're not told here in chapter 1 why he didn't want to go to Nineveh, only that he wanted to run away from God.

And have you noticed, from the presence of the Lord, is mentioned twice in verse 3? It's first mentioned in the beginning of the verse, and also again at the end of the verse, away from the presence of the Lord.

[7 : 26] In fact, it's narrated a third time in verse 10, in the middle of the storm scene, as Jonah told the sailors he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

We also don't know exactly where Tarshish was, as some commentators think it's possibly the south of Spain, at the edge of the known world at that time. But actually, it doesn't really matter.

All we really need to know is that God told Jonah to head east, by land, where Nineveh was geographically, inland, on the other side of the Fertile Crescent.

But Jonah went west, by sea. He couldn't have gone more opposite if he tried. Jonah wanted to hide from God, but he can't, because the Lord is sovereign over all things.

Notice what the Lord did in verse 4. 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.

[8 : 29] But signs of God's sovereign actions didn't just stop there. Jumping ahead a little, we discover in verse 7 that God is sovereign even over chance.

The sailors cast lots to find out who's responsible for bringing the tempest upon them, and the lot fell on Jonah. In verse 9, God is sovereign over all things. In Jonah's own confession, he says, the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

In other words, He's the God of everything, and the creator and the sustainer of everything. And also in verse 17, God is sovereign in Jonah's rescue.

The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. Jonah can play hide and seek all he wants, but there is just no way he can outsmart God.

And in a peculiar way, Jonah's shocking disobedience also underlines God's grace and mercy. which is the second big theme, that the Lord is exceedingly gracious and merciful.

[9 : 38] You see, a prophet who is disobedient should ring all sorts of alarm bells. Moses was forbidden to enter the promised land after he struck the rock with a staff rather than simply speaking to it.

And about 150 years before Jonah was prophet, in 1 Kings 13, another prophet was killed by a lion because he believed someone else's lie rather than obeyed the word of God.

So things were not looking great for Jonah. Not only did he willfully run away from God, albeit in futility, he also didn't care much for the sailors or even himself.

As the mighty tempest threatened to break the ship, in verse 5 we read, The mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his God, and 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.

These mariners were experienced sailors who took on bad weather in their stride.

[10 : 48] And if they were afraid, the storm must have been a particularly terrifying tempest. And if you've ever been caught in the storm while in a boat, you'll know what it feels like.

The last thing you could possibly do is fall asleep. Now sure, it may have been possible that Jonah laid down because he was seasick, but I don't think that was why he fell asleep.

I think he slept because he didn't care anymore. In fact, the language of the text with the repeated word down is sort of a report card on Jonah's spiritual state.

Verse 3, He went down to Joppa. Verse 5, Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. He's going down, down, down, further and further away from God.

Quite the opposite. of where a prophet of God should be heading. And what's even more obvious that Jonah didn't care was the deliberate omission in Jonah's part when the captain of the ship came to him in verse 6.

[11 : 55] 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. Spot the irony here.

Everyone was praying to their gods, a small g God, who could do absolutely nothing about it. But the guy who had the red emergency telephone in his hand, who's able to call the one big God who can do that rescue, that guy doesn't pray.

But if we're honest, aren't we often rebellious to God? I know I am. Perhaps there are times when we know there are certain things God wouldn't like us to do, but we do it anyway.

Because in that instant, we think we know better than God. We fool ourselves, thinking we can somehow justify our wrong actions, our sins.

But God is no little g God. He is the one and only big g God. He sees everything. He knows everything.

[13 : 05] There is no place we can hide from him. Nothing we do or don't do that he doesn't know about. Yet, God is gracious and merciful.

Moreover, when the lot fell on Jonah, laying the blame on him, the sailors started a series of rapid-fire interrogation-style questions. Look with me at verse 8. 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 notice his reply in verse 9. I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

He says he worships the God of everything, the God who created and sustains the very sea they badly need to get out of and the dry land which they'd desperately rather be on.

He leaves the sailors in no doubt that the God he worships is the one responsible for their present crisis. the very God Jonah is trying to hide from.

[14 : 12] Even the sailors see Jonah's actions as ridiculous. It's no wonder their response was one of fear and horror. It was enough to send a chill down their spine.

Verse 10. Jonah's reply doesn't connect with Jonah's actions.

The words which came out of Jonah's mouth was a statement of faith. And doctrinally it's perfectly sound. But the problem is that his running away didn't match up with what he just said.

You don't need a theological degree to know that. Even the pagan sailors knew that. His actions betrayed his words. He is by the very definition a hypocrite.

After all if you really believe God is the author and sustainer of all things why would you not follow his command? Why would you run? Jonah talks the talk but he doesn't walk the walk.

[15 : 20] Israel also had a tendency to say one thing and do another. During the divided kingdom when the nations split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah they claimed to worship God.

But the Bible records there are not even one good king in Israel. Israel completely turned away from God erecting Asherah Pauls worshipping Baal and other idols instead of being a light and blessing to other nations she became like the nations around them and were just as bad if not worse.

It was a wake up call to wholeheartedly and devotedly turn back to God and worship him before it's too late. For us Jonah is a wake up call to living consistent Christian lives but the problem is we think that we can treat our Christianity like a light switch.

Perhaps we switch it on when it's Sunday or with our Christian friends but switch it off when we're with our family or our non-Christian friends. The Bible makes no mention of part-time or full-time Christianity.

Just as it's impossible to be half-pregnant a part-time Christian is a contradiction in terms. Are we on our best behaviours on Sundays but the rest of the week we join in on crude locker room talk or gossip?

[16 : 46] Or perhaps we sincerely believe that Jesus died for our sins yet our everyday significance and security is found more in our career our financial security our appearance our material possessions or our children's education.

None of these things are bad things but how we spend our time reveals our priorities in life. Would you and I be known as someone who live consistently with our Christian identity?

What would our friends or colleagues or even our family would say about how we live? Jonah's lack of consistency reared its ugly head in his disobedience to God which meant especially as a prophet he didn't deserve God's grace and mercy.

Yet the wonderful message in this chapter is that despite Jonah's rebellion God is still gracious and merciful to save. Jonah hides but God seeks and God not only saves Jonah but the sailors.

Furthermore in contrast to Jonah at every turn the sailors behave more admirably than Jonah.

There's the irony that the sailors prayed but Jonah didn't back in verse 5 and 6.

[18 : 03] Also the sailors tried hard to find solutions to their predicament. In verse 5 they chucked valuable cargo overboard to lighten the ship to prevent it from breaking up.

They even asked Jonah of all people what could it be done in verse 11. 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 had come upon you.

And even after that the conscientious sailors still wouldn't throw Jonah overboard. Verse 13.

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.

And lastly it's only when they exhausted all other possible options did they finally cast Jonah into the sea. But before they did notice how they first prayed to Jonah's God to forgive them for the sin they were about to commit.

[19 : 12] Verse 14. 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 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. Now whenever we see the Lord in capital letters appearing in the Bible it's almost always God's holy name Yahweh.

It's the same name God used when he appeared to Moses in the burning bush the great I am who I am Yahweh. And here the sailors began to adopt Jonah's God as their own God and recognized his sovereignty and pleaded to him for forgiveness and mercy.

Despite Jonah's terrible witness God was gracious and merciful relenting from his wrath and saving the sailors from the storm. And remarkably in Jonah's own country in Israel despite being unfaithful and repeatedly turning their back to him God also delayed his judgment on Israel for a few more decades.

And like Jonah we all have rebelled against God. But for us God's grace and mercy is ultimately shown in Jesus and through him though we don't deserve it we can escape God's judgment.

[20 : 40] The great news of the gospel is that though we may hide God seeks us through Jesus. And isn't it wonderfully liberating knowing that just because sometimes we fail to be good witnesses for Jesus God is still sovereign and he can turn hearts despite our own worst behaviors.

And if he can use a disobedient prophet like Jonah he can use us too. However that's not an excuse for slacking because if we know God is sovereign that he sees and knows everything and that he is gracious and merciful what is our response?

Which leads us to our final heading why on earth would you not fear the Lord? Why on earth would you not fear the Lord? In contrast to Jonah's wrong fear of the Lord the sailors help us to see what right fear of the Lord looks like.

And having just experienced the power of the Lord to raise the terrible storm and to bring it back down and to spare them from death the sailors were left in zero doubt who's really in control and they responded in the only appropriate way possible in complete humility and contrition to the awesome and fearful God.

Verse 16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. Now the Hebrew translation actually reads they feared Yahweh a great fear sacrificed a sacrifice to Yahweh and vowed vows.

[22 : 20] Notice the double occurrence of words double fear double sacrifice double vows. I'm told in Biblical Hebrew one of the ways to emphasize a forceful word is by repeating it.

So here the sailors truly see the massive gulf between their own helplessness and the greatness of Jonah's God and they can do nothing but worship him. God's name Yahweh or the Lord is also used twice and it emphasizes that they acknowledged Jonah's God as their own.

And isn't that wonderful? We can also look back and see how the sailors fear of God progressed through the chapter. In verse 3 they were afraid of the storm.

Out of a scale of 1 to a maximum of 5 it was a category 3 fear a medium fear if you like. And in verse 10 when they discovered Jonah was running away from the Lord they became exceedingly afraid.

Even more fear. A category 4 of fear. And in verse 16 the sailors reached peak fear. The men feared a great fear sacrificed a sacrifice and vowed vows.

[23 : 33] Comprehensive catastrophic fear of God. A category 5 fear. Contrary to the cultural norm in the face of face of such an awesome yet merciful God to fear God is a completely rational response.

But to run away from God like Jonah is completely irrational. And despite Jonah's disobedience miraculously God saves him too in verse 17 the last verse.

The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. And by doing so God provided the means which Jonah ends up going to where God wanted him to go in the first place.

700 years later in Jesus' day the religious establishment had the privilege of being with Jesus in person. Yet their hearts were also hard. Matthew 12 38 picks this up.

Some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him saying Teacher we wish to see a sign from you. But he answered them an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

[24 : 51] For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish so will the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it for they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

And behold something greater than Jonah is here. Just as Jonah was cast into the sea to save the sailors from God's wrath Jesus was casted to death.

But unlike Jonah who was being punished only for his own disobedience Jesus took the full brunt of God's wrath on that cross for all sinners so that through his death and resurrection those who repent and believe him can be saved.

That's almost New Year's Eve and just in time for resolutions for 2019. So if you're a Christian why not resolve to live more consistent Christian lives?

Living each day and every day every moment in step with the pattern of life set by Jesus. And if you're someone investigating the Christian faith for yourself why not resolve to fear the Lord?

[26 : 05] To rest in Jesus finished work for you, why not follow Jesus today? No one can hide from the sovereign Lord who is exceedingly gracious and merciful.

So why on earth would you not fear the Lord? We'll have a few moments silence to reflect on what we just heard and then I'll pray.

from Jonah chapter 4 verse 2 You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

Heavenly Father, we are so unworthy of your mercy and grace, yet you sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place that we might live through faith in him.

Thank you for Jesus. Help us therefore to have soft hearts. Help us to have a big view of you, that we might submit to your sovereignty over all things.

[27 : 12] Help us not to be tempted to want to run our lives our way, but to live in obedience to you. Help us to live consistently as Christians, so you might be glorified as you alone are worthy to be worshipped.

Amen.