

Jonah: The Unexpected Messenger

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[0 : 00] An example of that yesterday, I was coming back from the shop, reading a paper and walking at the same time. I should now realise that men can't do two things at once. For a long time.

True, but... And I landed up, almost flat on my face. And so I hurt my hand and I hurt my knee. Only a graze, I haven't broken anything, so I'm fine.

But as soon as I landed on the floor, there were two women who helped me. One who was slightly older, one who was slightly younger, helped me up.

And the younger one got my paper together. The other one made sure that I wasn't in shock. I probably was, but if you're in shock, you don't know you're in shock. You say, no, I'm not in shock, I'm fine.

And it was just a short walk round to my house. But she said, you know, I've got a car, so she offered that and offered to walk with me. But I'm a man, so you don't ask for help.

[1 : 02] But it was fine, and I got round there. And just today, and you'll think I've told this story before, because I'm a rotten driver of wheelchairs, just coming down Winterbrook Road, poor old Sylvia slid out of the chair.

I gave her two slidier pair of trousers. And I couldn't get her back in. Again, a lady across the road came and helped me put her in. Now, in my view, these were angels.

They weren't in white, they weren't shining. They were people sent by God to help me when I needed them. So I believe in angels. I think that's a song as well.

But that's got nothing to do with Jonah. Jonah. And it's Jonah, an unexpected messenger. Have you heard the tale of Jonah and the whale way down in the middle of the ocean?

How did he get there? Whatever did he wear way down in the middle of the ocean? Some of you think, yes, John's gone mad at last. Or perhaps, you know, he's gone mad for a long time.

[2 : 08] But some of you will know that's an old chorus people used to sing with their children. And it's a story.

It's one of the most well-known stories of the Bible. I think even today, when Bible knowledge is not that good, most would have heard of Jonah and the whale.

Though, of course, the story of Jonah does not mention the whale. Well, only a big fish. Now, the book of Jonah contains only 58 verses. But in these verses, there is such a lot of story.

Because they include a storm at sea, the conversion of sailors, a miraculous rescue, a song of praise, the repentance of Israel's archenemy, and an intensely honest dialogue between God and Israel's most reluctant prophet.

And these verses reveal the nature of God's relationship to the Gentile sailors, to Israel's enemy Nineveh, to non-human creation, the wind, the fish, worm, and cattle, as well as to his messenger, Jonah.

- [3 : 18] Now, we know little of Jonah. He's mentioned in Two Kings as a prophet who came from Garth Hefa, which was a small village just north of Nazareth.
- And the only other mention of Jonah, apart from this book of Jonah, is in the Gospels. Part of that was read this morning, where Jesus refers to Jonah.
- And I'll come to this later. Now, on that morning, when Jonah first heard the word of the Lord, he was not expecting that his destiny was to be God's messenger to Nineveh.
- He wasn't expecting that that was God's plan for him and his destiny. And destiny is used in quite a few ways. It would appear that this year it was going to be Manchester City's destiny to win the treble.
- In Star Wars, Darth Vader told Luke Skywalker that it was his destiny to come over to the dark side and serve the evil emperor.
- [4 : 19] Some are destined for musical greatness, or were Handel, Bach, Beethoven, and many others. Or literary greatness, Shakespeare, Dickens, and again many others.
- And in the Bible, we see many people fulfilling their destiny. Moses leading the people of Israel out of Egypt. Solomon building the temple. John the Baptist proclaiming that the Messiah had come.
- And of Jesus himself, Simeon said to Mary, This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and the sword will pierce your own soul too.
- So the book of Jonah is about the destiny of one man, Jonah. And we should see how this destiny is fulfilled, reluctantly, what that meant for Nineveh, and what we can learn from it today.
- Now, Jonah never wanted to be a prophet. He never wanted to be God's messenger, especially to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, who were Gentiles, and therefore, in his view, outside the grace of God.
- [5 : 33] And it would be the Assyrians who would defeat the northern kingdom of Israel and send them into exile. So Jonah's first reaction on being commanded by God to preach to Nineveh was to run away.
- The Hebrew says that God said to Jonah, Rise and go. Instead, Jonah rose and fled. He tried to go as far away as he could by going on a ship going in the opposite direction to Nineveh.
- But we cannot get away from God. We cannot hide from God. Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there.
- If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. Psalm 139. And Jonah found that out. He could not hide from God.
- He may have thought he was safe from the Lord on the boat, but God commands the sea, and he sent a storm which threatened to wreck the ship. Jonah realized that God caused the storm because of him, because he was disobeying God.
- [6 : 37] And he told the sailors to throw him overboard. And if they did that, the sea would become calm. So Jonah wasn't all bad. He wasn't completely disobedient.
- He realized that what he was doing was going to harm and perhaps kill innocent sailors. So he sacrificed himself for the rest of the people on the ship.
- And then when he was thrown overboard, the storm went and the sea became calm. So a little reminder of Jesus on the Sea of Galilee, where his disciples were scared, but he stilled the storm.
- God is sovereign over air, sea, and land. This is where the great fish comes in. It may have been a whale, but we don't know.

But that's not important. What is important is that God sent the fish to rescue Jonah to save him from drowning. It was an act of mercy. Chapter 2 of Jonah just relates Jonah's prayer, which thanks God for his mercy in rescuing him, and that he, Jonah, would worship the Lord and acknowledge that salvation comes from the Lord.

[7 : 50] Let me come to chapter 3. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. In almost the same words that God spoke in the first chapter, God speaks to Jonah again a second time.

I think this shows that God does not give up on us. He is a God of mercy and grace. If we fail, if we disobey God, he does not disown us.

He gives us a second, a third, a fourth chance. Most of the prophets are portrayed as men and women of God, heroes and heroines of God, people we should model ourselves on.

But not Jonah. He is not only reluctant. Isaiah and Jeremiah were reluctant. But when commanded by God the first time, he refused to obey God and ran away.

But God came to Jonah again, despite his efforts to escape going to Nineveh. He came, God came to Jonah a second time. Our God is a God of grace.

[8 : 53] Without the preaching of Jonah, Nineveh would not have repented. Those people would have stayed in their wicked ways and would have died in sin. God's will will be done.

God wanted Jonah to preach to Nineveh and God got Jonah to preach to Nineveh. And then God tells Jonah what his message should be.

Now prophets must speak, but only speak the message given to them by God. If not, we need to heed the advice of a father to his son. It's best to keep your mouth closed and be thought of all and to open it and remove all doubt.

To fulfill his destiny, Jonah had to obey the word of the Lord, what God was telling him to do. This is just as important for us today.

We want to fulfill our God-given destiny. We have to listen to what God is telling us to do. God is telling us to do. That is not easy.

[9 : 57] There are so many other voices we could listen to in this world of ours, especially now with multimedia and all the things that come with that. Now, it would be great if God spoke to us directly and said, this is what I want you to do, and written it out for us.

But it doesn't happen to most of us. And it did not happen to most people in the Old and New Testament, to be fair. We have to rely on the word of God being interpreted to us by the Holy Spirit, by what our leaders say, by guidance and friends and events.

But C.S. Lewis gave us, said this, if only the will to walk is there, God is pleased even with our stumbles. If we want to walk with God, if we want to follow any steps, we want Jesus to be our Lord.

And if the will is there, it's okay to stumble. So in the end, Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh, a very important city or big city.

Now, we live in a very big and important city, a city important to God, a city which God wants to bless and to use us to bless it. I think that must be part of our individual destinies and the destiny of this church, to be a blessing to this city of London, starting with where we are in Herne Hill.

[11 : 20] So Jonah didn't hang about once he got into Nineveh. He proclaimed, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned. The end.

Possibly the shortest sermon ever preached. Some of you are thinking, I wish it happened here. But for Jonah, these eight words, only five in Hebrew were the message.

The only message spoken by Jonah in this book. Sometimes what a prophet says is obscure or ambiguous. It's a bit like the English language can sometimes be ambiguous.

This is a language where a house can burn down or burn up, where you fill in or fill out a form, where a slim fat chance are the same, and quite a few is the same as quite a lot.

No wonder we get confused sometimes with the language. But Jonah's message was clear. No ambiguity. A message to a people to whom Jonah did not want to preach, and to a people Jonah did not want to repent.

[12 : 23] But God says and continues to say, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. Not I will have mercy on whom I want to have mercy, on whom you want to have mercy, on whom the church wants to have mercy, but I will have mercy on whom I, God the Lord, want to have mercy.

And Jonah's message wasn't an uplifting, happy message, not one I would want to have to deliver myself, but one that was required because Nineveh was a wicked city.

It required to be told of its sin and wickedness. It needed to be told that there is no free lunch. You cannot sin and get away with it. There will come a reckoning. There will be a judgment.

And people need to hear this today, not because we have a God who wants to judge, but a God who is merciful and wants to save. Not as a preacher started his sermon by saying, I shall speak under three headings, each beginning with a P, plague, punishment, and pestilence.

Three areas which I believe beautifully illustrate the love of God. What illustrates the love of God is that he sent his only son, Jesus Christ, to die for us and to raise again.

[13 : 33] Now something that Jonah didn't want to happen. The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

The Ninevites believed God. Not Jonah, not the message, but believed God. Our message must point to God and his son.

One greater than Jonah is here. We'll look at that a bit later. And we should repent before him. Repentance in Nineveh was shown even by the highest in the land.

The king recognized that he and his people had been wicked and needed to repent what they had done. And even this pagan king saw in a God, a God who was merciful and compassionate and who may turn from his anger.

And that's what God did. When he saw the Ninevites repenting, he did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. The king was right. God is compassionate.

[14 : 35] He had a heart for Nineveh. He wanted his people safe from destruction and to follow the only true God. Jonah's destiny was to bring God's message to Nineveh. He did this and they were saved.

He would have thought, having done that, he would have been delighted with the effect his message had. But no. I think this is the only instance I know of where a preacher had been angry that what he preached actually had an effect.

And most people preach and nothing happens. But he was angry because all these people repented. Jonah was so angry that he prayed to God, to him to take his life.

God asked Jonah, is it right for you to be angry? But then God supplied a plant because Jonah was in the heat to save Jonah from the sun.

And Jonah was happy with the plant. But God sent a worm which killed the plant. And this made Jonah angry again. Angry little man, Jonah. But here we see that God pitied Nineveh and destroyed a plant.

[15 : 35] But Jonah pitied a plant but demanded the destruction of Nineveh. That's the difference between us. God is merciful. Again, God said to Jonah, you shouldn't be angry about the plant which only lasted a day and not be concerned for Nineveh with its large population, including its animals.

And that's actually where the story ends. What can we learn from Jonah? First of all, that God has a plan for us.

God has a destiny for us. I'm willing to suggest that it would not involve being three days and three nights in the belly of a big fish. But it could involve almost anything else. From being a prophet of God to this wicked city of London, to being the salt and light where you work, to being the messenger of God to your neighbours, to being the best you can be with what God has given you.

And do not think that because you have disobeyed God in the past, or that he may be even disobeying God now, that he has forgotten you. Peter asked Jesus, How often should I forgive someone who sins against me?

Up to seven times. Jesus answered, No, not seven, but 77, or seven times 70. We read, God will never leave us, nor forsake us.

[16 : 56] He is the God of the second chance. He showed us with Jonah and with the disciples who fled following his arrest. In particular, he showed it to Peter, who had denied him three times.

But Jesus came to him and said, Follow me, feed my sheep. And God came to Jonah a second time.

And he will always come to us a second or third or fourth time. I don't know what God's plan is for me for the rest of my life, or for you, but I know two things that we are destined for, if we believe in Jesus Christ.

Those he predestined, he also called. Those he called, he also justified. Those he justified, he also glorified. If we are in Jesus Christ, we will be glorified.

And finally, there is something we can look forward to, that we're destined to look forward to. And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

[17 : 58] I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice on the throne saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them, and women.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them, and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

That's what's going to happen when Jesus comes again. No mourning, no crying, no pain, no more death. That is our ultimate destiny, and because of it, we need to share the message of God, of Jesus Christ, who do not yet have this destiny.

Jonah also shows that God is a merciful God. We should never underestimate the love and grace of God. In Jonah, God had mercy on Nineveh, a people who would eventually destroy Israel.

There's an old hymn which says, The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell. It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell. God's love reached the pagan sailors and saved them.

[19 : 10] He reached the people of Nineveh, even though they were the ones who would destroy Israel. His love reached out to Jonah despite his disobedience. His love reaches out to us and those around us, and we need to show that love and mercy and grace to those who need to know Jesus.

God is sovereign. It's not for Jonah or us to question the purposes of God. I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

