

God's Plan and Jonah's Plan

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 June 2017

[0:00] But Jonah rose to flee to Tartish from the presence of the Lord. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So, a few short verses for us this morning, only three of them, as we kick up our series on Jonah. But really, I also want to just introduce the book a little bit, talk a little bit about some of its themes, talk about why it is that we're studying Jonah. Now, I have known preachers who can go for 45 minutes on one or two verses.

Don't look at the short number of verses this morning and think that I'm about to do that to you. But, I do want us to ask, what is this book of the prophet Jonah?

What is it about? Why does it matter? And why am I preaching on it? Well, let's start with the basics of the setting, of what happens there. The book is set in the 8th century BC, not long before the Assyrians will overrun Israel.

[1:34] Now, we know the time of the setting because this Jonah character turns up in 2 Kings 14, where he is described as God's servant, described as a prophet who was active during the reign of King Jeroboam II of the northern kingdom of Israel.

And so, the dating puts us in the 8th century BC. Now, the setting is important because it tells us who this Jonah is.

We don't get a very full description of him at the beginning of the book. But it tells us that he is a prophet, tells us that he is a servant of the Lord. And it also tells us a little bit about this Nineveh that he is called to go to, which is an Assyrian city.

Now, keep in mind what I just mentioned. The Assyrians will overrun Jonah's people within decades, probably, of the setting of what is going on here.

Now, it helps us to keep in mind that Assyria, and by extension Nineveh, is viewed as a threat, really as an enemy to Israel.

[2:48] And it's a threat that would be shortly realized. Now, what is the book about? That is not a very simple question to answer.

It is a multi-layered account. There's more going on here than the simple Sunday school account of Jonah getting swallowed by a fish and being puked up on the beach. The themes will really start to take shape for us as we work our way through it.

But there are some important things going on here, things that I want to mention and to highlight as reasons that I've chosen the book for our series. First, Jonah, like all of Scripture, points us to Jesus Christ and points us to the Gospel.

And on a related front, it has a lot to teach us about the character of God, His mercy, and His determination to bless all the nations of the earth. First, in the Old Testament, through God's people Israel, and ultimately, as we see fulfilled in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Finally, I've chosen this book because there is a lot of application for us as servants of God. Now, let me explain what I mean by this for a moment. Sometimes we like to insert ourselves into the Old Testament stories in a way that's a little bit questionable.

[4:09] We see the heroic Old Testament figure, and we like to think, oh, I'm like him or her. So, we're like David when he defeated Goliath. We're like Noah when he obeyed God and built the ark.

Of course, we never like to think that we're like David when he committed idolatry, or adultery, rather. We're like Noah when he planted a vineyard and then got totally hammered. We don't like to think about ourselves in those moments.

But, I think that we can rightly see ourselves in Jonah. We can see ourselves, our sinful tendencies, in his disobedience.

We can see ourselves in his hard heart. I have been there, I have to admit. As we go through Jonah, I'm guessing you'll probably have to admit that you've been there too.

So, with that introduction, let's go ahead and jump into the text, starting with Jonah hearing the word of the Lord. Verses 1 through 2.

[5:10] 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.

So, so far what we're seeing at the beginning of Jonah is, in a lot of ways, the kind of thing we'd expect to see in the life of a prophet.

The word of the Lord comes to the prophet. That happens. That should be familiar to us. That's what we would expect to happen. Already, though, we're seeing a little bit of a plot twist, if you will. Because Jonah isn't being sent to God's covenant people. He isn't being sent to the children of Israel to call them to repentance, to call them to be faithful to their covenant with God.

Nope, that's not what is happening here. Jonah is being sent to Gentiles to call out against them, because it's implied that the Lord wants them to repent.

[6:11] And he's not just being sent to any Gentiles. He is being sent to Gentiles who are a threat to his own people. Gentiles who will eventually overrun them.

So the word of the Lord comes to his prophet. Now, the call has a little bit of a twist to it, but it doesn't totally shatter our expectations. We can count on what happens next in verse 3 to do that. 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 down into it to go with them to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord.

The prophet hears the word of the Lord, as prophets will. And what happens? He rises up to run away. He rises up not to obey the word of the Lord, but to disobey it.

Now, it's not unusual, as we look through the Old Testament, to find people who are called by the Lord and are hesitant, because they think that they're unworthy or unclean or incapable.

[7:22] But that's actually not Jonah. He just plain doesn't want to do what the Lord has told him to do. So he disobeys and he flees. The text tells us that he flees to Tarshish.

Now, what is the significance of that? Well, first it has to be said that scholars aren't completely sure where that is. But it seems likely that it might have been located in what is now Spain.

Now, what they agree on is that it was some distance away to the west. Nineveh, on the other hand, was to the east. Now, think for a second about what Jonah was doing.

Instead of being obedient to God and going to Nineveh, he took off in the opposite direction, trying even to flee from God's presence, as if that were possible.

Well, how's that for defying our expectations? Not exactly what we would expect out of the Lord's prophet.

[8:31] What in the world is going on and what does it mean? First of all, let's ask this question. What does God intend in calling Jonah to go and call out against the people of Nineveh?

Now, we don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves here. It will be made clear in the text later on. What we can say is that the word Jonah received is a clear indication of God's care for the people of Nineveh.

His willingness to show mercy to them through Jonah's announcing that they are about to come under judgment, even though they are Gentiles and they're not part of God's people Israel.

Well, that sounds like a good thing. Why wouldn't Jonah want to take on that mission? Well, remember what we've talked about already.

Nineveh is a literal threat to Jonah and his people. And all of a sudden, God calls Jonah into expressing God's concern for those people. Now, here's the painful truth.

[9:38] We all like God's concern and compassion for ourselves. We are never so quick to approve of God's compassion for our enemies. Now, interestingly enough, Nineveh was located in what is now the stomping grounds of ISIS in today's world.

Think about that for a second. Imagine that the Lord called you to be his messenger to go to ISIS in person and let them know that they are coming under God's judgment to let them know because God is concerned about them.

Probably not the first thing you'd want to sign up for, is it? Not so much. Jonah didn't seem to think that that was the kind of thing he wanted to sign up for either.

So, he disobeys God, tries to run in the other direction. We'll see that that didn't work out so well for him. But let's ask, what does all of this mean for us?

I think in answering that question, we have to look at what God is up to and we have to look at what Jonah is up to. Let's start by digging deeper into what God is up to here.

[11:04] First, we will see that the promises of God are at work through this reluctant prophet. And in that, we will receive a foretaste of the gospel message.

Now, think for a second as a bit of background about God's covenant with Abraham way back in Genesis. because unless we think about that, we won't understand God's concern for the people of Nineveh or Jonah's call.

God promised Abraham that in his offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And we see a kind of working out of this promise in what God intends for Jonah.

Jonah, prophet of Israel, descendant of Abraham, gets the call to go to those who are enemies of God and God's people. To let them know of the judgment that is coming.

Because as we see, God cares for them. God, in compassion, intends to send a reluctant prophet, a son of Abraham, to his enemies.

[12:12] Because he intends that through the offspring of Abraham, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. what we see at work here already, we find ultimately fulfilled in Christ Jesus, the greatest offspring of Abraham, the son of God.

He came willingly to those who were God's enemies, that through him all the nations of the world will be blessed. We see God's promises fulfilled in Christ already at work in Jonah.

The nations being blessed by the offspring of Abraham, which would come to completion in the one who was our epistle reading for this morning told us, died for us while we were still sinners, so that we would be justified by his blood and reconciled to God.

Now, God's concern for Gentiles in Jonah, his determination to send a prophet to them, to bless them, points us forward to the gospel of the promised Savior, Jesus Christ.

It's an important takeaway for us as we dig deeper into Jonah. Now, the next thing I want us to take away for this morning flows from the first.

[13:37] We see God's promise to all nations at work here. We see the gospel foreshadowed, as I've already said. But that means something to us concretely for mission.

Just as Jonah was called to Nineveh to reclaim the word of the Lord, we have also been called.

Where have we been called to go?

Anyone know? Excuse me? Yes.

In other words, everywhere. Everywhere. Right? Making disciples of all nations. So Jonah was called, and so were we.

Now, God didn't seem to care if Jonah liked the people of Nineveh, if Jonah thought that they were worthy, if Jonah thought that they were his sort of people.

[14:40] He called him to go. One of my seminary professors always used to say all the time that God is a missionary God, and so he is.

We see that at work in Jonah. And that means that if we are God's people, we must be a missionary people. Missionaries to all nations.

But not only that, to the people who live across the street, the people in our neighborhoods, the people in our city, beyond that. The harvest is plentiful, as our gospel reading tells us.

Now, this morning, the question we should ask ourselves is not will I go? The question is, to whom am I being called to go?

I hope we will all ask ourselves that question this morning. Now, we think about what God is up to in this passage.

[15:48] It's setting the stage for what will follow in Jonah. We see God's promise and God's mission. But what does the thing that Jonah's up to mean for us?

Jonah disobeyed and he tried to run from God. Now, there is nothing new under the sun. What happens in Genesis 3? Adam and Eve disobey and they try to hide from God.

have you ever been there? I have.

And that can take all kinds of forms. It can take the form that it took in Jonah of God calling you to do something that you just didn't want to do, so you ran from it.

God's will for you first in your life. And you've decided to run from that, to seek your own will in your own way.

[17:01] Or maybe you've been trapped in a pattern of sin that you didn't want to let go of, and it has caused you to retreat and to hide in shame. there are so many ways to disobey and to try to

flee.

But as we will see, there is no place to hide. Now, when my dog gets into trouble, as she will, for whatever reason, she thinks that if she doesn't make eye contact with me, I don't see her. Jonah is acting a bit like my greyhound here. If I'm not looking at God, if I'm going in the opposite direction, he must not see where I am.

Of course, he knew better than that. But that doesn't stop us from trying, it does it? So there are so many ways to disobey and flee, but there is nowhere to hide.

The hound of heaven, as we could say, has a way of finding us. So I just want to say, if you find yourself this morning at a place in your life where you're running from God, or if you're living in deliberate disobedience to him, it is time to stop.

[18:25] Because the reality is that there's no need to run. Because if we confess our sins, he's faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. There is no need to run because even though his plans for us are often difficult, they are good.

We don't need to be afraid. But, if we are running in disobedience, and we are determined to keep running, we do need to be afraid.

Because he will not stop short of causing a giant fish to swallow us, to bring us back to him and his will for us. This morning, if you are a servant of the Lord, as Jonah was, and you're not running from him, take heed this morning not to start.

Jonah's example to us is that it is possible to be the Lord's servant and yet to disobey his word. It's a caution to all of us this morning.

Be obedient to his will. So, in closing, this morning we've taken a first look in Jonah, at what God is up to, and to what Jonah is up to, and what we can learn from the example of each.

[19:49] We've already seen human sin, both on the part of Jonah, as well as seeing the sin of the people of Nineveh described, and we've already seen divine mercy.

We've seen sin, we've seen mercy, and these threads will continue throughout the book of Jonah, throughout our series, and they will continue to point us ultimately to Jesus Christ, our Savior, to teach us about our sin and the character of the God that we serve.

In the name of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit, Amen. and the who that is the that you that you that lip to the and you and lip lip lip lip lip lip lip lip lip lip