

Something Fishy in the State of Nineveh

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Date: 06 July 2008

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, we're beginning a series on the book of Jonah, and the theme over the next four weeks will be mission and global mission.

And the question that Jonah 1 is going to raise for us is this, do you fear God? Do you fear God? Do you reverently sense his greatness and power and holiness over you?

Do you have an affectionate reverence for the God who made heaven and earth, for the God who made from galaxies to gardens, the one in whose image you've been made?

Do you fear him? Do you have a worshipful, vigilant trust in the God who sent the Lord Jesus to be crushed crushed for your sins?

Does that make you tremble? And the next question would be, if you fear God, how much? How much do you fear God?

[1 : 13] Do you fear God enough to tell others about him? Or do you fear man more than God? Do you fear God enough to say hard things, to speak about that God to prickly people who don't want to hear about him?

Do you fear God enough to redirect your resources toward the cause of global missions? Do you fear God enough that you pray constantly for your loved ones who don't know him?

How much do you fear God? Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying, Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me. We are in the 8th century before Christ. We are living in the northern kingdom of God's people, Israel, the nation state.

Assyria, the great pagan nation to the north and northeast, threatens to crush God's people. And the word of the Lord, the word of Yahweh, Israel's covenant God, the true and living God, comes to his prophet.

[2 : 40] And the prophet is told, go to the north. Go into Assyria and to that city of Nineveh and cry out against it.

Prophetically announce the coming judgment of God against human wickedness. Their wickedness has come up before him.

That is literally, their wickedness has come up before the face of the Lord. God's righteous rule extends over every nation of the world.

Every wickedness in thought, word, deed is seen by God and is an insult to the majesty of the creator of heaven and earth.

Not just wickedness in Israel, but wickedness in any part of God's world. God is not a territorial God, but he's the God of all the earth.

[3 : 38] Now friends, we need not guess what God is up to here. We know from the whole book what he's up to. Why does God want Jonah to go and preach judgment? The answer is because God wants to show mercy.

God wants to rescue Nineveh. God wants to invoke a repentance from that city so that he can relent and show grace and favor.

God's intention is rescue. The prophet Jonah sets out to flee to Tarshish, to flee from the presence of the Lord.

He went down to Joppa, found a ship going to Tarshish, paid his fare, goes on board. Away from the presence of the Lord. Jonah's response to God's call and God's command is flight, is disobedience.

And again, we don't really need to guess what's going on in his head because we know from later in the book of Jonah exactly why he disobeys God.

[4 : 47] This is what he'll tell God at the end of the book. Chapter 4, verse 2, Jonah prays to the Lord and says, Jonah knows that God wants to save Nineveh.

Jonah knows that God's character is rescue. And so Jonah flees because Jonah does not want to share God's grace with the world.

He wants it to remain with himself and with his own people. He's selfish. So here we have, friends, God's ordinary dealings with people.

God's business with us is this, judgment and salvation. Judgment, salvation. For God to ask Jonah to warn of judgment is an act of mercy so they have a chance to receive salvation.

If God just wanted to judge the wickedness of Nineveh, you wouldn't send a warning, would you? You would just, their wickedness is built up before him. You would just destroy the city.

[6 : 11] That would be judgment. But it's God's grace and mercy and it's God's heart of mission that he sends the prophet to warn them.

It's true that the default outlook of God toward a rebellious world is judgment. We saw it in the lips of Jesus as he taught in the reading before.

In the reading before he said, On the judgment, you know, the people of Nineveh will cry out. And on the judgment, this will happen. There is a day of judgment coming. God has a day where every person will give an account to God.

And if you have not been rescued or forgiven, then you face the wrath of God. You face eternity apart from God. But God's business in the world now is mission, is rescue, is forgiveness.

God's character is gracious, merciful, slow to anger. Judgment day has not come because God is slow to anger and he wants to show mercy to as many as possible from every nation of the world.

[7 : 23] God is abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing. And so we know really the kind of joke of the book of Jonah is that Jonah is going to try and escape from the presence of the Lord.

And yet he's the God of the whole earth. He's not just in Israel. He cares about the Nineveh and he cares about every country of the earth. There's no escaping from God.

You can run, but you can't hide. So Jonah goes on the ship. And the Lord hurls a great wind upon the sea. And such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.

This is no ordinary storm. This is a supernatural judgment of God. As God pursues his prophet, his disobedient prophet, you can almost imagine from a distance watching this sort of specific thunderstorm just chucking this boat around.

And for them, it probably feels like the whole ocean is against them. But it's really just attacking them. And the mariners, the sailors, the sea hardened men are afraid.

[8 : 33] And each cried to his God. They threw the cargo and the ship to the sea. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down to the to the whole of the ship and was laying down fast asleep.

I think Jonah has been so anxious to get away from God and disobey God that he probably hasn't slept for days.

And he hits the ship and thinks foolishly that he's escaped God and collapses and is asleep. And so we have this pagan captain.

These pagan sailors are so much more godly than Jonah in this chapter. The captain came to him and said, what are you doing? Sound asleep. Get up. Call on your God.

Perhaps the God will spare us a thought so that we do not perish. Yahweh, the God of Israel, has an enormous desire that Nineveh be saved.

[9 : 34] And now that desire, that power in the heart of God for mission is channeled against Jonah and is causing the ship to be knocked around and tossed around.

It's the fury of God against his disobedient servant who wants to selfishly hog the mercy of God and doesn't want to share it with the world.

And the pagan sailors, they think that it's one of them. One of their gods is causing this storm. One of them must have done something wrong.

And they must pray to their own individual little g god so that they can appease their god and hopefully the storm will stop. And so they ask Jonah, you know, maybe it's Jonah.

And so they get Jonah up and they cast lots. Kind of great pagan practice which has some biblical use. And, you know, the Proverbs teachers in Proverbs 16, 33, you know, you throw the lot but it's in the hand of the Lord.

[10:40] The result of casting lots or throwing dice is in the hand of the Lord. So the sailors pray, you know, to their gods, show us who on this boat is guilty for this catastrophe that's causing this catastrophe.

Who's being punished? And the lot fell on Jonah. And so they interrogate him. Who are you? Where do you come from?

What people are you? And Jonah gives them the worst possible answer, the worst news they could ever hear.

I am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Literally he says, Yahweh, God of heaven and earth, is the one I worship or more literally the one I fear.

Now this would send, this made the sailors, it says, even more afraid. They've heard of Yahweh. They've heard of the God of Israel. They know that that God tolerates no other gods.

[11:51] They know that this is the true and living God is the one chasing them. And they have a prophet of Yahweh on their ship who's disobedient.

They know they're in big trouble. This is worse than any of their little gods after them. This is the true and living God. So what do they do?

Well, they don't know what to do. They say to him, tell us, what should we do to you that the sea will quiet down for us? And for the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.

There's a time pressure here. They need to figure this out. This boat is going to break up. Jonah says to them, I think pretty much knowing that his God is God.

His God is going to do what he likes with his prophet. Jonah doesn't want the sailors to have to die for his selfishness, for his disobedience to the master God.

[13:06] And the sailors are very reluctant to kill a prophet of the Lord. As they should. They're beginning. The sailors are actually beginning to fear God. They're actually beginning to be converted.

And they start praying to God because the rowing doesn't help. Please, O Lord, O Yahweh. This is the pagan sailors now. Please, O Yahweh, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life.

Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you. They were pagan sailors praying to their pagan gods. Now they're praying to the true and living God, reverently asking for forgiveness for what they're about to do.

And they throw Jonah out into what is for them looks like certain death. And the sea is immediately calm. And they know that Yahweh is God.

They know that Yahweh is the true and living God. And they know it's time to start living and worshipping him. And fearing him. And so verse 16 is a kind of summary, I think, of what happens to the sailors.

[14:16] Then the men feared the Lord even more. And they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. So you get a sense there that this is what they did, not just on the ship, but when they got back to land, they stayed as Yahweh worshippers and continued to worship him and make sacrifices to Yahweh, the true and living God.

These pardoned pagan sailors have been converted through the disobedient prophet Jonah. It's an amazing thing, really, if you think about it, friends, that even in the disobedience of Jonah, in the discipline of God, mission happens.

God is sovereignly at work spreading his name. Jonah's first converts on his evangelistic mission are the mariners. As far as they know, they've been rescued through the death of God's servant. Now, Lord Jesus himself had a similar incident with his disciples on a boat where he was asleep. And there was a great storm.

And the fishermen, the experienced sailors, were fearing the waves. And they wake Jesus up to say, come and pray, come and pray. And Jesus wakes up and says, peace be still.

[15:41] And the winds and the waves obey. So different to Jonah where they've got to pretty much throw him to certain death to get God to stop the wind and the waves. Jesus just says, peace be still.

And in that incident in Mark's gospel, the disciples are terrified of Jesus. They get to a point where they become fearers and worshippers of the true and living God who is Jesus.

Friends, this is what God's agenda for the world. That God wants your friends, your work colleagues, people you don't even know, God will use everything he has to make this happen.

He'll use every strength, every force of nature, every superstitious pagan. He'll use that to bring them to him. Every sinful disobedience. God will achieve his evangelistic goal for the earth. The gospel cannot but spread through Jonah. Because that's God's character. That's what he wants to do. Wherever Jonah goes, converts are made. Even when he's trying not to evangelize, it happens.

[17 : 09] This is because God desires at the deepest recesses of his own heart to do mission. God desires that his fame be spread abroad.

The forces behind mission or world evangelization or proselytization, whatever you want to call it, are unstoppable. Because that is God's will.

Now let me illustrate this, friends, with an example of a man whose picture I've got on a slide. You may recognize him. He's a good-looking man.

His hair's a bit funny. His name was George Whitefield. And in 1736, at the very young age of 21, he was ordained to the Church of England.

And this was an age when Christianity in Britain was dying. It was nominal. It was corrupt. The Church was dying, if not almost dead.

[18 : 13] In many ways, in a much worse state than it's in today. And it's in a bad state today. And George Whitefield was mocked for being such a young clergyman.

And apparently, as he walked down the street, people would laugh at him and say, there goes a boy parson. And they mocked him. But George Whitefield preached the gospel of God without fear of man, but only with fear of God.

He preached justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ. He preached against salvation by works, which was the most common false gospel of the day.

Bishops were teaching salvation by works. He preached of a genuine relationship with God that comes from the heart, that through being born again by God's Spirit.

And as George Whitefield preached, empty churches were filled. So he held more meetings.

Sunday, he would just go, church, church, church, church, church.

[19 : 22] He'd have six, seven, eight meetings. Everywhere he went, churches were filled of hundreds of people, and hundreds were turned away. Began preaching every day.

Churches were filled every day, as he preached. Hundreds were turned away. It's said that his meetings were filled with a dead kind of silence, a holy hush.

And the only thing that could be heard was the weeping of people as they wept out of guilt for their sins, that God would send a saviour to die. And they would cry with tears of joy and thankfulness.

Now, Whitefield had a lot of opposition. A lot of clergy, I think, were jealous of him. He said, I preach nothing but the basic doctrines of the Church of England.

But in contrast to the other clergy, his life was marked with fear of God. His life was marked with a fire and passion and zeal.

[20 : 29] And eventually, they closed the churches to him to stop his ministry. What did Whitefield do? Well, he didn't fear man, he feared God.

He went and preached in the open air. And God did an amazing work. They came in the thousands. Literally, 10, 20, 30.

One journal entry, he says, he counts 60,000 people. I mean, even if that's exaggeration, they came in tens of thousands to hear him preach in the open air meetings.

Benjamin Franklin, who wasn't a Christian by any means, not in the kind of evangelical sense, couldn't believe that there were that many people. So he went to one of Whitefield's meetings in America.

Whitefield wanted God's fame to go to every country of the world. And so he preached in America. And Benjamin Franklin started where Whitefield was preaching and measured how far he could walk and still hear Whitefield's booming voice.

[21 : 38] This is in the age before amplification. And then Benjamin Franklin was a bit of a scientist, so he measured the circumference of the area and worked out according to kind of two people per square foot how many people were there.

And Benjamin Franklin was astounded and said, the reports are true. You know, there are 30,000 people here at this one meeting. And he had these meetings every day in multiple places and times on Sundays.

Whitefield's ministry included preaching to people that the church didn't want to go to. So he went to the coal workers, the working class in Bristol. And as they came out of the coal mines, he preached the gospel.

This is what he said of his preaching to them, to the colliers. They had no righteousness of their own to renounce. They're just sort of immoral working class men.

But they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was friend of publicans and came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected, that is, moved by the gospel, was to see the white gutters made by their tears which plentifully fell down their black cheeks as they came out of the coal pits.

[23 : 05] Hundreds and hundreds of them were soon brought under deep convictions which, as the event proved, happily resulted in a sound and thorough conversion.

And so Whitefield began these sort of open-air churches. He recruited John Wesley. John Wesley was 10 years older than him and is more well-known than Whitefield. But actually, Whitefield was the leader of this movement which became the Great Awakening, the great revival of the gospel which transformed Christianity in Britain and in the American colonies.

The Great Awakening, the effects of it continue to our world today. It began with a recognition that God is to be feared. The God of heaven and earth, the Father of Jesus Christ, is to be feared and known by faith.

George Whitefield was a great man. He feared God. He was a humble man, but before men he was bold. Jonah was a coward, was disobedient.

He was selfish. He thought he could keep God's grace to himself. Friends, where are you on the spectrum between Whitefield and Jonah? Between boldness and disobedience, selfishness?

[24 : 30] Where are you on that spectrum? The good news of the book of Jonah is this. The same God is God of both men and everyone in between.

And when God wills that his greatness be known, when God wills that his majesty be feared through all the nations, nothing can stop or resist him.

Our God is the same God. Yesterday, today, forever. God's spirit is still at work today. God's spirit is the one that breaks people's hearts and makes them alive to him.

Wonderfully, God still today sends global warnings through instruments of mercy. God sends prophets. God sends missionaries, evangelists, teachers, to bring the word of grace and forgiveness through Jesus to everyone.

God will do it, friends, whether by man or by mouse, whether by Whitefields or Jonas. God will do it. He will do it by spiritual gifts given to each one of us, the whole body of Christ.

[25 : 43] He will do it through our prayers, your prayers. He will do it through our resources, through our giving to mission. He will do it through our speaking up about Jesus, that we are Christians, that we're not ashamed to be called Christians.

He will do it through painful discipline. He will do it through suffering of the church. God must further his name. God must be made known through all the earth.

This is the message of the book of Jonah. God will not yield his glory to another. He will not allow the wicked peace. Until they come to a true reverent fear of the living God.

God will not stop short of bringing warning after warning of calamity and catastrophe until people turn to faith in Jesus Christ and be reconciled to God.

The wickedness of the world, of rebellious people who don't want to know God their maker, rises up before his face every day.

[26 : 52] Go out and cry against it, is the command of God the Father today. My plan is time to perfection. Be patient.

Sow the seed of the word of God. Go, commands our Lord Jesus Christ. I have died and risen that their sins may be forgiven.

Go and tell them. Go, cries the Holy Spirit, that stone hearts will be made alive to God. The one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, will increase the fear of his name.

He must do it and he will do it. Lord our God, we join with you and we long for your glory to be known in the earth, for people to reverently and rightly fear your name and to be forgiven from their sin and rebellion and wickedness.

Lord God, I pray that you would do this. Use all our resources, all our efforts, all our frail attempts at evangelism, all the times where we've sometimes, like Jonah, been disobedient and embarrassed

about our Christian faith.

[28 : 14] Chasten us, discipline us, and use every word we speak to bring forth your gospel in our lives, among our friends and to all the nations of the earth.

Amen.