

The Tragedy of Jonah

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[0 : 0 0] our friends let's pray our father we thank you for making yourself known to us through your son father we pray this day that you would help us to learn from you as we read these scriptures together we thank you for the book of jonah we pray father that you would teach us from this book remind us of what it means to be your disciples and we pray this in jesus name amen our friends the city of tel aviv is on the south eastern shore of the mediterranean at some 30 miles from jerusalem and within the modern city of tel aviv there lies the ruins of a much more ancient city that is the ancient seaport of joppa now joppa is famous for many things in history for example it's the port where solomon landed the great cedars from lebanon it's where the greeks fostered the legend of andromeda according to them joppa was the location of the rock from which perseus reached rescued andromeda from the sea monster joppa was where richard the lion-hearted built his citadel in the days of the crusades it's the place from which through which napoleon passed and it is the location from which general allenby routed the turks in 1917 joppa is a city with a mysterious and a romantic past and joppa is a city that features in two very important stories in the bible you see it is in acts 9 and 10 where the the apostle peter receives his call by god to go and speak to the gentiles it is from that city joppa that peter reluctantly goes to meet with cornelius and the first gentile christians are converted and are received joppa also features in another place in the bible you see the book of jonah tells us that it was from joppa that another reluctant missionary was to depart in order to tell some other gentiles to listen to god and repent and in these uh next few weeks we are going to be looking at the book of jonah and it is a great book with a great story that raises great biblical themes so let's turn to it together have your bibles open please um now because this is the first talk we need to do some uh background work as it were to set the scene for this whole story first thing i need to do is to explain to you a bit about nineveh nineveh is a very important city in the old testament and very important in the book of jonah in the old testament as a whole nineveh represents something very significant an idea as it were it represents everything that is big everything that is bad and everything that is an intolerable affront to god nineveh is a great and evil city it is a godless place the second thing i need to explain is about the way god calls prophets in the old testament you see there's a very distinct pattern amongst the prophetic in the prophetic call you can see it with uh people like mooses and with isaiah and jeremiah and if i was to uh sort of summarize it the pattern goes something like this god calls a prophet out of their daily routine to do a great and difficult task the prophet argues with god and disputes with him but eventually the prophet agrees perhaps reluctantly that they will go the prophet jonah is one of the great exceptions of the bible in fact i think he's sort of an anti-prophet in some ways i look at jonah chapter one verses one to four god calls jonah to preach his word and notice what jonah does not do he does not argue he does not dispute and he does not go

instead he flees from the presence of god and from the command of god a third thing i need to explain is the city of tarshish it's mentioned there in jonah chapter one verse three now we do not know much about tarshish from the rest of the bible or even from historical documents however what we do know from the bible is this tarshish is another seaport you can see that in psalm 48 and isaiah 23 but it is also linked with libya and greece in isaiah 66 as a place a distant land where god's fame and glory are not known in other words if you wanted to flee from god where would be the best place to go tarshish where god's glory and fame are not known because you want to get away from god so go to a place where he's not known and see if you can find shelter there so that's the background to this book in the bible and with that background in mind let's have a look at the details of chapter one as we do i want you to remember that jonah is a jew now jews came from a country that was largely landlocked so they were therefore therefore largely landlubbers they did not like the sea a few of them were sailors and fishermen but largely they did not like the sea and water you

see for them the sea was a deep dark mysterious place full of you know ancient of of terrible and great sea creatures out of it was it represents the sea was out of control as it were um but for jonah what he would do he he wanted to travel westward and the dark and dangerous sea and he thought that a much better option than traveling in the opposite direction toward nineveh verse four tells us that being on the sea was better than being in the presence of the lord but as jonah flees god acts as god had spoken his word to jonah he now chases jonah with his actions verse four tells us god hurls this great wind upon the sea and it stirs up those heaving waters a mighty tempest births burst forth the ship threatens to break up and verse five introduces us to the sailors or mariners now the sailors you've got to remember are not jews they're outsiders they're experienced sailors but they are gentiles they know nothing of him who walks upon the surface of the deep which is what the psalmist calls god they don't know jonah's god the lord and they don't know that jonah is fleeing from this god but as their ship is being tossed and shaken verse five tells us that they shake with fear and turn to prayer they call upon every god in an attempt to find the one who's responsible for this tempest at the same time they do the wise and practical thing they lighten their load the precious cargo is thrown overboard in an attempt to preserve their own lives and in the second half of the verse the camera pans back to jonah and he still refuses to respond he goes down into the hold of the ship you see previously he had closed his ears to god's word now he closes his eyes to god's actions um perhaps he feels i've effectively got away i'm safe and secure here in the midst of this tempest god and his resistance to my to god and my uh and his insistence at my preaching has been left behind nineveh has been left behind don't care about the tempest just care about the fact that i've escaped so off to sleep he goes all secure in the midst of the churning sea he finds some peace and he finds it in sleeping and eventually the sailors find him asleep and they're absolutely dumbfounded can you see it there look at look at the captain's words in verse six he says how can you sleep in other words he's saying something like what are you doing here asleep arise call on your god maybe just maybe your god will be able to do something none of the other gods we've been consulting have been able to do it maybe your god will give us a thought or two so that we won't perish now underneath all of those questions is the real question that they're seeking an answer for and it is this who is this god that we are dealing with why is he doing this to us and what have we done to make this god so angry now jonah is now awake uh they urge him to join with them in the search for the right god to contact and placate verse seven tells us that in their search they cast lots and a lot you'd know it wouldn't you forced to jonah and uh the one who you see speaks his powerful words and controls the winds and the waves also controls the throw of a dice so now the sailors have found the person responsible and they begin to interrogate jonah and look at verse eight they ply him for answers tell us who is responsible for making all this trouble for us what kind of work do you do where do you come from what is your country what people are you from what people are you now underneath all those questions is the real question who is this god that we are dealing with and why is he doing this to us and what have you done to make your god so angry and jonah caves in and the truth finally comes to surface look at verse nine i think this is the central verse for the chapter he says i am a hebrew and i worship the lord the god of heaven who made the sea and the dry land more literally it says i'm a hebrew and i fear i fear the lord the god of heaven who made the sea and the dry land now these men you see they're horrified at what at the at uh because they've seen the power of this god you see these experienced sailors have done everything they knew to do they have unsuccessfully battled to overcome this god in the force of the wind and the waves they know that the god that they're dealing with is not some backyard deity or some sort of tame idol in someone's corner in the corner of someone's lounge room uh they the increasing heaving of the seas bear witness to this and so in verse 11 they say look how should we respond to this god and in verse 12 jonah tells them they should throw him overboard so i'm the troublemaker just get rid of me you'll get rid of your problem they're not convinced unlike jonah who's willing to sleep while the sailors were in danger they do their best to save jonah they row hard but verse 13 tells us that the sea grows more and more tempestuous before long they're left with no choice they've got to get rid of jonah and so they proceed in the appropriate manner they do all the things that one needs to do they call upon the lord this foreign god they ask for his understanding and favor they ask him to stop them making a mistake and prevent them shedding innocent blood and then they act as agents of god's justice they pick up this recalcitrant and they hurl him into the sea and immediately the storm is switched off and the sea returns to its normal state and the men realize they've been in the hands of a real god and verse 16 says that they fear the lord and they offer sacrifices they make vows in the presence of the god of heaven and the lord

of the sea and the dry land they bow in worship so there's the story now why do you reckon this story is here well it does tell us some very important theological points first and foremost it's a story about god isn't it and what do we find out about god we find that he's a real god and he's a creator he is the one who made the heaven and the earth the sea and the dry land it's he who in the other in the language of the bible sits above the circle of the earth and who walks upon the surface of the deep he creates the world he sustains it he controls every corner of it he controls the elements he bends them to do his will the god of jonah and the god of the bible you see is fundamentally a creator he's a real god worthy of the name god and worthy of worship as god second this passage tells us that as creator of the world god has a will for his world and that means he has a word for his world and that word must be given and in this case it's a word of judgment a word of responsibility and as we'll see it's a word of salvation and it will be delivered nothing will stand in its way you see not even recalcitrant prophets will stand in the way of god's word being preached now we as christians know this reality don't we we know what lengths the god of all the earth will go to to speak his word don't we for we know that god sent his son into the world to live and die as god's ultimate and final word to his world do you remember the words of john one in the beginning was the word and the word was with god and the word was god he was in the beginning with god through him all things were made without him nothing was made that has been made in him was life and the life was the light of mankind and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it and then verse 14 the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us and we have seen his glory the glory of the one and only son who came from the father full of grace and truth do you see what effort god will go to bring his word to his world he will incarnate it in flesh as it were and his son will come into the world to die that's how much god wants his word to go to his world and we christians know this this passage teaches us also that god is not only the creator who has a word for his world but he's the redeemer and this is seen very clearly in this passage we see it's his nature to rescue and redeem we see his compassion here we see him reaching out even to sinners like jonah even recalcitrant prophets and gentile sailors are objects of this god's love and concern and again we who are christians know this don't we for we know that even while we are sinners even while we were god's enemies even while we were against god even while we were at war with god christ died for us the new testament's clear about that in passages such as romans 6 you see at the right time paul says while we were still powerless christ died for the ungodly very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die but then paul says god's will our love is overwhelming for god demonstrates his great love for us in this that while we were still sinners christ died for us you see the god and father of our lord jesus christ is the god of love he's therefore the redeemer even those far away from him are objects of his love even his enemies are those upon whom he sets his affection but let's return to the passage i want you to have a look at verses 9 to 10 they are i think the heart of the passage although those other christian doctrines are present the main point of the passage is not them you see i think the main point of the passage is found in verses 9 and 10 they're the key to unlocking the whole let me explain i wonder if any of you noticed that the word fear or related words occurs four times within this chapter you might scan it and see if you can spot them the first one verse 5 sailors are afraid then in verse 9 jonah says that he worships or more literally he fears the lord in verse 10 the sailors are terrified or more literally i love the hebrew it says they feared with a great fear that is they're exceedingly afraid and then in verse 13 the the sailors greatly fear that is they fear with a great fear the lord now let's again just let let's have a look at the two parties and fear here um let's concentrate on what's said about them and fear look at jonah first jonah says in verse 9 that he worships or fears the lord now what exactly does it mean to fear the lord well the term is a technical term in the old testament to fear the lord has precise meaning fearing the lord in the old testament normally means respecting god revering god submitting to god trembling before god because he is god giving god prominence in your life and living as though he really was god and so people who feared god in the old testament normally expressed their fear by obeying him and serving him yielding their lives to him but in this chapter in this chapter jonah tells us that jonah can say the words okay but he's not so good with the attitude and actions now it seems to say the words are little more than a creed to him now friends we know all about creeds we say creeds nearly every week here at holy trinity um it's very easy isn't it and perhaps you've caught yourself doing it standing saying the creed you know it off by heart but your life may not be living up to it and i think that's what jones is doing here you see he can stand up and he can say it before these gentiles i

fear the lord the maker of heaven and earth but he hardly lives it does he he is hardly interested in the reality of it for when god speaks what does he do he runs when god acts what does he do he sleeps and when god judges in jonah 4 he's found sulking you see jonah is god's person in the sense that he belongs to god but he's not god's person because of anything that he is jonah is rescued at the end of the chapter not because he's a good god fearing man no jonah is a man who knows the fear of god in his head and he can recite it with his tongue he can reap the benefits of being in god's presence jonah is a man who's happy to have the privileges of being among god's people but he is reluctant to exercise the responsibilities of being god's person you see he hardly is one who lives in the fear of god he is hardly one who lives like one who resides in the presence of god the sailors recognize this immediately these outright pagans look at him and they say basically they are just incredulous at his lack of godliness they are shocked at it let's have a closer look though at the sailors and their fear and as we do remember these sailors are outsiders they are gentiles they are strangers to god and his purposes they have their own gods as paul will say later on in the new testament they are without god and without hope in the world but look at what happens as they face the elements as god controls them look at what happens and look at their response they fear and then they act they search out for god behind the stormy elements now look once they've tracked down the god the true god who's responsible and they hear about him from jonah what do they do they fear with a very great fear they fear exceedingly they fear the consequences of what

[20 : 20] they what has happened having glimpsed the reality of this god they're horrified at jonah how could this worshipper of such a great god be so trite about him how could one who says that he fears the lord the god of heaven who made the sea and the dry land be asleep while this god calls how could you run while he speaks how could you not stand in awe of his action now take a look at verse 16 and the third reference to fear in relation to the sailors we're told that they fear the lord exceedingly and they offer sacrifices and they make vows you see where jonah should have vowed obedience in response to god's call the outsiders do it instead now let me just remind all of us here that most of us have at some point been in the place that the sailors have been in haven't we perhaps um we should corporately just stop and remember i want you to just in your mind just go back across the years and bring into your memory that day when you first felt the fear of god now there are a number of you here today who have experienced that fear of god like the sailors have and if you have you might search your hearts and remember remember that day when you discovered just how lost you were remember that time when you first became aware of god's great holiness and your great sinfulness i was 18 it was the day before my 18th birthday actually i remember the time and the place but for you it might be different it might be a sermon or when you're reading the scriptures or when you're deep in prayer or through some event that god brought about in his providence and through some mechanism though you became aware of god in a way you never had before and god caused you to look within yourself and when you did you you discovered a terrifying truth you discovered a great evil lurked within your heart and you remembered your past with great shame and disgust and you knew that if god was god then he must inevitably punish you and the evil within and fear began to take possession of your heart and you knew that death was to be feared because it would mean that you'd have to meet your maker and you knew death could not be uh that his life could not be lived knowing that you were out of tune with the design for which he made you and if you're christian then you know what happened when god responded to you you know that he brought you the great news of jesus and you know that as you heard this story you realized that this god man died for you and he died in your place and he took the punishment that was due you and as you took on this great news you discovered that there would be no hell for you no abandonment by god you were redeemed in christ and you feared the lord exceedingly before him you fell and gave your life i want to close today's bible talk with that background and i want to point out to you the tragedy of jonah here i wonder if you can see it you see here is jonah a man who has had all the benefits of being god's person he is with god with god in the world he knows god he has been given god's word he has received that word but he ignores the god who gave it on the other hand the sailors who are outsiders

respond how jonah should have they had that it is deliberate this story the way it is presented here is jonah here are the mariners the sailors and the sailors get it right and god's person gets it wrong you see the tragedy of jonah is also a danger for us you see many of us are just like jonah but we're even more culpable than jonah for we have heard of something far greater than jonah ever heard of

we have seen something far greater than the upheaval of the created order we have heard god's living word in jesus he who is the radiance of god's glory the exact representation of his being as the writer of hebrews puts it the great god the creator of heaven and earth in human form and we have seen the upheaval in the heart of god as his son dies in our place and yet we christians friends often insult our god and father and our lord for he urges us to hear his word to know it and respond to it and we don't we don't even read his word because we run out of time or he challenges us in some area of our lives and we flee from the threat and we come to church and bible study but we don't let his word really impinge upon us as it should and we act with complacency and we recite creeds about him and sing great songs about his greatness and majesty but let's face it often friends we sit in deep slumber in our christian lives oblivious of his actions in our world and we shield ourselves from his challenges we do the metaphorical equivalent of sleeping in the hole as he challenges us or we utter self-justifications about our negligence and we shake off his word we have great privileges don't we but we have often run from the responsibilities that go with them and the privilege of being christian and knowing god the god of all the earth comes with responsibility friends if this is you if you are irking your responsibilities as god's person let me urge you to stop and take stock think about the sailors think about these outright pagans who hear about your friends who have perhaps come to know jesus and you've seen what it has done in their lives think about their joy and their enthusiasm and their fear and remember how you too once felt that fear enthusiasm and joy and take a lesson from the outsiders who have come to know jesus take a lesson from them be shamed by them and bow again before the god of all the earth today go back to the cross and stare at what it tells you about god and himself and and his son and yourself go back to the scriptures read them again and fear the god that you meet there don't just say it do it love him obey him stop running and live what you profess see we have given the greatest privilege a human being can possess we have been given relationship with the living god the creator of all and the redeemer of the world well this god calls us to respond he calls upon us to reflect the privilege he has given us in responsible living before him let's pray father we thank you for this great chapter in your word we thank you that your word is living and active and sharper than two-edged sword any two-edged sword piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit of joint and marrow and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart father please as your word cuts us and father help us to come running to you the god of all grace and thank you for your forgiveness and your welcoming in the lord jesus christ please help us to live in the light of these things we pray in jesus name amen thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you very much thank you thank you