

Fleeing form God

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[0 : 00] Now, in case you haven't worked it out already, we are looking through the prophecy of Jonah over the next four weeks, Jonah 1, 2, 3, 4. So it would be handy if you bring a Bible with you, a physical copy, or have one in your phone, which you can then refer to.

Some of the verses will turn up on the screen, but sometimes not always. And if you've got a physical copy and you're wondering where Jonah is, it's hard to find. He's not only fleeing from God, but perhaps from us as well.

It's between Obadiah, which also probably doesn't help you, and Micah, maybe a bit more helpful. But they're in the minor prophets, so sort of right in the middle of the Bible.

If you open it up, you'll be able to find that. But otherwise, look in the index page, and you'll be able to pick that out too. Well, let me start with a question.

What do you do with things you hate to do? Like doing the laundry, or ironing, or your tax returns, or making that difficult phone call to make up with someone else.

[1 : 10] There's normally one natural reaction, isn't there? It's the word called procrastination. It's the hope that perhaps if you leave it long enough, it might just go away, and you wouldn't have to do it anymore.

Well, at the start of this prophecy that we're looking at, we see what Jonah does when confronted with something he doesn't want to do. But first, we need to work out what he was meant to do. And that occurs in verse 1, when the word of the Lord comes to him. So looking at verse 1, Now this was an important task for Jonah.

The fate of a great city hangs in the balance. Judgment was coming upon it because of its wickedness. And yet, if I were Jonah, I could think of a number of really good reasons why I might not go myself.

Yes, this was a great city, but the people had a fearsome reputation. What chance would I have against them? Furthermore, God's message to them wasn't the sort of happy greetings at Christmas kind, was it?

[2 : 29] Instead, God wanted Jonah to preach against it, to tell them that they needed to repent of their wickedness. That would go down really well, wouldn't it?

Besides, Nineveh was a long way away. I mean, really, God, why do I need to go there if I was Jonah? Why me?

And besides, what makes them so deserving of this message anyway? Why even warn them? They're not God's chosen people. Given all the wickedness they've done, do they really need to be given a second chance?

And so I think if you think about it, Jonah's reluctance is perfectly justified. Except this was the word of the Lord. This wasn't some mere suggestion from a fellow human being, but the word of God. Now Jonah responds in the most extreme way possible. He runs or flees from God. So in verse 2, we read, But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.

[3 : 35] He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. Now if you want to get an idea of the lengths to which Jonah was going, then you have to see where Joppa and Tarshish were, which is on the next slide.

Now the location of Joppa, that's not disputed. It's modern day Tel Aviv, sort of. And it's on the coast because Jonah was about to find a ship. But he was certainly going in the opposite direction, wasn't he?

Nidave was up north and east and inland, whereas Joppa was south and towards the west by the sea. Now where he was going, Tarshish, the location is a bit more uncertain.

One view, one popular view is as the graphic has it, it's all the way down in the south of Spain, where the Mediterranean Sea was meeting the Atlantic.

Others think, oh, probably not, probably somewhere in northern Africa. But wherever it was, this was a distant port. And Jonah's intent was clear, wasn't it? He was trying to get as far away from Nineveh as possible, so as not to even have the slightest chance to do what the Lord had commanded.

[4 : 52] But of course, if Jonah had bothered to think about it a bit more carefully, he would have realized that trying to flee from God was rather fanciful. It's just like the psalmist says in Psalm 139, verse 7.

To the answer of where can he go? He says, If I go up to the heavens, you are there. You, the Lord, are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, which is obviously what Jonah was trying to do, even there your hand will guide me.

Your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, surely the darkness will hide me, and the light become night around me, even the darkness will not be dark to you. The night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

I'm not sure how acquainted Jonah was with Psalm 139, but such was his determination, he was going to try anyway.

Which sets the scene now, as we look further to God's response, and by it, our understanding of what invariably happens when we try to flee from the one who made the sea and dry land.

[6 : 05] So verse 4, the story continues. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his own God, and they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, how can you sleep? Get up and call on your God.

Maybe he will take notice of us, so that we will not perish. Now I want to pause here at the story, to just make a couple of points. The first is the way Jonah's journey and actions are described.

There's a definite trajectory, isn't there? Of Jonah going further and further down, as the story unfolds. So we read, he went down to Joppa.

Then he boarded the ship, and he went down below deck, and he laid down to fall into a deep sleep. Of course, in the next chapter, we know where it eventually ends, even further down, isn't it?

[7 : 10] With Jonah in the depths of a huge fish. It's all symbolic of where trying to flee from God lands him. By contrast, we have the captain asking him to get up, and call on his God.

The second thing to notice is, as we go reading on further, is to observe what the pagans do and say by way of contrast with Jonah.

So I'm going to keep reading, and I'll see if you can pick up some of these differences. So verse 7, Then the sailors said to each other, Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.

They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, 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?

From what people are you? He answered, I'm a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. This terrified them, and they asked, What have you done?

[8 : 12] They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so. The sea was getting rougher and rougher, so they asked him, What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us? Pick me up and throw me in the sea, he replied, and it will become calm.

I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon me. Instead, the men did their best to row back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

Then they cried to the Lord, Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased.

Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this, the man greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

So, run your eyes again over that story, and can you sort of pick up what the difference is between how the pagans behave and how Jonah behaves?

[9 : 18] Well, I think the most obvious is the fear of the captain and the sailors, isn't it? So, verse 5, we have all the sailors were afraid. Verse 10, this terrified them.

Verse 16, the men greatly feared the Lord. And to these, we add all the actions which together reflect actions and words of fear, don't they? So, the captain pleads with Jonah to call on God. When the lots are cast and Jonah is found to be responsible, they fire off these series of questions, don't they, in verse 8. Who is responsible? What kind of work? Where do you come from? What is... And not a moment do they stop to actually wait for the answer, do they?

They're just overwhelmed, as it were, by emotions of fear. And in the midst of this all, they were throwing their cargo overboard, which is likely precious cargo for which they've been paid to deliver. And yet, they were doing this because they wanted to save their lives. And so, this is the comparison that we get, which is ironic, I think, because these men were totally ignorant of God.

[10 : 22] One day, they were pagans, idle worshippers, grasping in the dark, praying to whichever God would listen to them. And yet, when they finally realized in verse 11 that they truly, that God, the God of Jonah is the true God, they are immediate, aren't they, in their worship of Him.

They're conscious, almost, even though they're lacking in knowledge of doing what is right by God. Initially, they tried to roll to land because they didn't want to kill Jonah. And when they fell, they actually plead to God for mercy.

Verse 14, Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man. For you, Lord, have done as you please.

They even know this truth, don't they? That God is sovereign. He's the one that is in control. And as the storm comes, we read that they greatly feared the Lord and offered a sacrifice and made vows to Him.

And so, these pagans, even though they're in fear, even though they're ignorant, respond rightly to God, don't they? By contrast, we have a supposed prophet of God who in verse 10 can even boldly declare, I am a Hebrew, I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

[11 : 43] And all his actions up to this point shows a total absence of worship to the Lord. He knows who the Lord is. He knows that the Lord is sovereign. He calls Him creator of the sea and the dry land.

And yet, when the word of the Lord comes to him, knowing that this is the word of the Lord, he tries to run away. And he has almost no fear in doing so.

He goes down and falls into a deep sleep as he's running away. Now, in verse 12, he finally realizes and admits his error. He says, I know that it's my fault that this great storm has come upon you. But it took all this drama for him to realize. And in the process, innocent lives are put at risk. And in amongst all this, we see that actually this sovereign Lord that he's meant to fear, God is doing all this in a merciful way.

Because even though the storms were fears and the lives were put at risk, not one life is lost. The events of the storm, the questioning of the captain, the casting of the Lord, all those are God's acts, gracious acts of tightening that cordon around Jonah to make him realize that it was futile for him to run away from the Lord.

[13 : 06] Jonah is like that king on the chessboard, isn't he? Like being pushed one step at a time into the corner until he finally surrenders because God has checkmated him.

But we mustn't misread God's heart in all of this, right? We don't read this and think, oh God is just trying to punish Jonah and be vindictive. Because if you go back to the original word of the Lord, the reason why God has asked Jonah to go to the Ninevites in the first place is because he has the salvation of the Ninevites in mind.

In fact, he has Jonah's own salvation in mind as well. And then finally, even though God causes Jonah to be cast into the sea, look at verse 17.

See what God does. He provides a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Even this was God's merciful provision, wasn't it?

To save Jonah. Well, God's not done with Jonah yet. There's more to come in the next few weeks, so stay tuned. But I want to turn now to our attention to ourselves.

[14 : 19] For today's passage has a lesson for us as well, lest we think this is only for wavered prophets of the past. How so? Well, God's word has come to us too, hasn't it?

We may think we need to hear a voice from God in the night or have a dream or vision, but actually God's word comes to us in his word, doesn't it? Through his son.

The Bible both points to the son, Jesus, but also preserves his word to us. And so whenever we open God's word, we open the Bible, we hear his voice.

The word of the Lord comes to us regularly, doesn't it? Each day as we read the Bible or each Sunday when we meet together, we are hearing the word of the Lord, aren't we?

Now, of course, it's also possible to run away from his word by not even wanting to hear it and not opening the Bible for fear of what we find in it. But the question is, when we do hear God's word, how do we respond?

[15:28] You see, there are ways to flee from God's word without having to get onto a ship. When we hear clearly the meaning of what he's saying and yet we try and explain it away or we minimize its application to our own lives or we're so bold to just ignore it downright altogether, that is to flee from God's word, isn't it?

And I have to say, as I look at my own lives, it's rather embarrassing how easily I do that. It's rather like the ironing for me that if I avoid it long enough, yeah, then my wife would do it, but in God's case, perhaps God might forget about it and you know, then maybe I don't have to do it anymore. But think about this, if God says something and then he takes it back or he just says, oh, it doesn't matter anymore, I've just said it but don't worry about it, what does that say about his character? And more than that, what confidence does it then give us for everything else that he might want to say or he has said? The other things that we like the sound of that we actually want to rely on, those good verses that we quote all the time, you know, and put on Facebook.

No, once God's word has spoken, it stands, doesn't it? Otherwise, it's not worth trusting in. We can't pick and choose the bits that we want.

[16:58] Either he's true to his word or he isn't. So we can't go, I like the bits that I want but I'm going to ignore God's word because I don't like it.

Either God is trustworthy and faithful for all his word or he's not for any of it. Now, this is not to say that God's word isn't challenging, that yes, sometimes some of what he has to say to us is hard to accept.

And God is also patient with us to help us understand what he, why he says what he says from time to time. But the question then is to ask ourselves that even as we wrestle with God's word, when does it turn from genuine wrestling to mere stubbornness not to obey?

And I think it's worth checking ourselves from time to time, isn't it? Lest we end up like Jonah. And there will be times when God will say to us that he's not beholden to explain everything to us.

He's God, we are not. And so, once he's made himself clear, even though we may not understand fully every ramification of what he's saying, we have enough to know that we need to listen instead of run away.

[18:16] Now, the other thing that I pick up as well and I realize from this is that when God has spoken, actually, and we have heard, then really, there is no way to avoid the impact of his word.

Just like Jonah, when God's word has come to us, there is really nowhere to run. Now, it may sometimes appear that we have succeeded.

We walk away from God and say, nothing's happened. Yep, looks like I've got away with it. But actually, all we've done is deferred the day of reckoning. Remember that New Testament reading that Enoch gave to us?

John the Baptist was going ahead of Jesus preaching a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, wasn't he? But right at the end of that reading, John did say this, which is on the slide, I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winning fork is in his hands and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

[19:29] What John is saying here is that when Jesus comes and he's spoken his word, that word will clearly divide people based on their reaction to him and his word.

Either we will be gathered as wheat into the barn or we will be burned like chaff in the judgment. If we accept and receive his word, then we'll be gathered, but if we run away from it or reject his word, then we will be facing his judgment.

We may be able to escape obeying his word, but we cannot escape the consequence of it. And at the end of the day, I sort of think that actually Jonah ought to consider himself thankful that he couldn't run away from the word of the Lord.

That God was merciful, actually, to give him that second chance, to keep pursuing him, putting him in that great storm, throwing him into the sea, all that stuff, because ultimately, it enabled Jonah to relent and to come back to God and to obey his word.

And I, myself, I can testify that God has been patient with me too. Often, when I know what is right and wrong, I decide to err on the side of wrong instead. I wouldn't be outright wrong.

[20 : 53] I'll just sail as close as I can to the edge of what is right and see how far I can get away with it, even though I know that's not what God wants of me.

And thankfully, in his mercy, what God has done is he's given me a foretaste of the folly of my choice before I go the whole hog and make a real mess of things.

And looking back, those are really God's acts of mercy, isn't it? that he hasn't allowed me to just run away with doing evil, but he's pursued me and brought me back with warning signs.

And so, when God speaks to us like that, we need to consider that God is not doing it to make life hard for us, but actually he's doing it to bring us back to him, to warn us not to step over the edge into what is his judgment for which there is no turning back.

And so, friends, today, because you're here, the word of the Lord has come to you. I'm sorry, you may not have realized that when you come to church today, but you have, and the word of the Lord has come to you.

[22 : 02] And so, the question to us now is, how will we respond? God's desire is that we come to this realization that even though it may be hard, first to accept what he has to say and then even to practice it, that ultimately his word to us is for our good.

that repentance, acknowledging our wrong, is a good thing. And that the best thing we can do when God calls us to trust in him is to do just that, to live it out.

Now, we often give the apostle Peter a hard time. You know, he's always naive and impetuous. But I think he got it right in John chapter 6 and verse 67. Here, we remember, if you remember, many disciples were deserting Jesus at the time that his teaching was getting hard, wasn't it?

And Jesus turned to the twelve and asked, you do not want to leave me too, do you? And then Simon Peter replied, this is where he got it right, he said, Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God. You have the words of eternal life. When we open God's Word, my prayer is that we will say, Lord, these are the words of eternal life.

[23 : 20] And we ought to accept it willingly, even though it's hard, because what God wants of us is for our ultimate good. Well, let me pray and ask God to help us to do that.

Father, we acknowledge that sometimes your Word to us is hard to understand, accept, and obey. Forgive us when we fail to obey what clearly we know to be the truth. Thank you for your patience to us.

Thank you for your forgiveness when we fail. Thank you for giving us a second chance, and even a third and fourth chance. Give us the strength to believe in the goodness of your Word, to trust in you wholly, so that we may obey you willingly.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.