

Fleeing or Fearing God

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning and Happy New Year. Let's pray together. Lord God, our Heavenly Father, as we look to your word now, we ask that you would speak to us.

And as you speak to us, would you help us to know how your word impacts our lives and would we seek to live in light of it. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, what are you expecting this year? I'm sure that there are a lot of expectations out there.

Some of them fairly tame. Some of them might be a little bit more edgy. Well, no matter how wild it might be, I'm sure that there will be some unexpected things this year.

Well, today we are starting the book of Jonah. Short series during the month of January. And what most people think of when they think of Jonah is the big fish.

[1 : 14] And the big fish swallows Jonah. We all know that. I mean, that's Sunday school right through. That's what we hear about Jonah.

And it's true. It's there. It's part of the story. But it's only part of the story. And there's much more in this book than just that. And what strikes me as I read through the book of Jonah is that there's so many things.

It's full of events and things that are quite unexpected. And so one of the unexpected things this year is going to be some of the unexpected things this year are going to be the unexpected things we see in Jonah.

So, hold tight. Let's go look at it. The book of Jonah is unique because it is a narrative.

All the other minor prophets are just oracles, are things that are spoken out. The book of Jonah is a story. And it's the story of the calling of God's prophet.

[2 : 33] And the usual pattern for the calling of God's prophet was that God would call a prophet to a particular task and that person would do it.

They would obey. And occasionally, there was pushback. Two notable examples of that were Moses and Jeremiah.

Moses, do you remember? At the non-burning bush, when he was called, God asked him to go to Pharaoh, to declare God his word to Pharaoh.

And Moses said, no, not me. I can't speak. And God said, who made your mouth? And then he made a whole lot of other objections, of course.

But finally, God said, just go do it. And Moses did. Similarly, Jeremiah, when he was called, said, oh, no, no, no, not me.

[3 : 46] I'm too young. And God said, don't say you're too young. I'm the one who's calling you. I'm the one who's going to speak here. Don't you feel that you're too young?

And so Jeremiah did what God was calling him to. Well, unexpectedly, Jonah is not like that.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up to me, before me.

And Jonah just disobeys. God had called him to go to Nineveh in the east. So what did Jonah do? He headed west to the coast, to Joppa.

And he doesn't speak to God. He doesn't. There's no pushback. It's just disobedience. Surprisingly, unexpectedly, Jonah the prophet doesn't want to have anything to do with God.

[5 : 04] This is kind of shocking. Especially, we know that Jonah was actually a prophet of God. In 2 Kings, we read that the unrighteous King Jeroboam II was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Libo Hamath to the Dead Sea in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant, Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath, Hephah.

This is the same Jonah. Jonah, the son of Amittai. He's been used by God, whether this was before or after the events of the book that bear his name.

Jonah was a prophet, and yet he chooses, in this case, not just to ignore God, but to run away from him.

Now, in a way, the reaction of Jonah was understandable. Because remember, Jonah's, the call of God is unexpected and shocking.

Go to Nineveh. The Ninevites, they're the enemies of God. The enemies of God's people.

[6 : 37] It's like being told, go into the ISIS camp and preach against ISIS. The Ninevites were hated.

They were a fierce enemy of God's people. They were cruel, and they would likely kill Jonah on sight, if he was lucky. Because they had a reputation of being cruel and bloodthirsty.

This was not a soft call for Jonah. And so he ran away.

But before we leave Jonah chapter... Before we leave verse 1, I just want to point out a little something about the irony of how he is identified.

Jonah, the son of Amittai. Amittai means faithfulness. So Jonah is Jonah, the son of faithfulness.

[7 : 46] In Hebrew, if you wanted to identify a quality in a person, you would often call them the son of that quality. So the son of righteousness, for example.

So given the story of Jonah, it's almost comical that he's identified as the son of faithfulness.

Because he is anything but faithful.

He ran away. Directly opposite direction to Tarshish. Which was probably a town somewhere on the Spanish coast.

As far away as you could imagine. But Jonah couldn't flee from God.

We've just sung that song. Which is a reflection of Psalm 139. Which tells us all about that you cannot get away from God.

[8 : 50] God is everywhere. He's always before us. Jonah must have known that deep down. But that didn't stop him running.

He gets on the boat at the port of Joppa. Jonah pays what must have been quite a lot of money to go as far as Tarshish. And heads there. So he's at sea.

And verse 4 tells us that God hurls a great wind on the sea. That's what the Hebrew connotation is. God throwing a great wind on the sea. It's violent. It's such a violent storm. That the ship threatens to break up.

Now sailors know about storms at sea. But this one has them worried and fearful. They're so afraid.

[9 : 54] Each of them turns to his own God. The hope that one, any one of them will respond. And at the same time, they did as much as they could to lighten the ship in the hope that it would keep afloat.

Even hurling the cargo overboard. That's how serious it was. That's how much they were scared.

But Jonah doesn't join them.

He doesn't appeal to his God, which is the only God who could have helped. Jonah, you see, back in verse 3, had closed his ears to God.

And now he closes his eyes to God. When God tries to get his attention with the storm, where does Jonah go?

He goes below deck and closes his eyes and goes to sleep. He has no concern for the Ninevites.

He wasn't going to go anywhere near them.

[10 : 58] He's got no real concern for the occupants of the boat, including himself, seemingly. He just wants to get away. Close his eyes and deny that it's all happening.

And the captain of the boat finds him sleeping and calls him out. This is entirely unexpected for the captain of the boat.

So there's an element of surprise. How can you sleep? Don't you know what's happening?

But there's a rebuke as well. Get up and call on your God. It's the duty of everyone on board to pray as hard as they can to anyone they know to pray to.

Because we are in big trouble. But also there's an admission of failure here. Of their gods. Maybe your God will work.

[12 : 00] Nothing else has. Maybe he'll take notice of us. And the sailors.

Well, they figure out somebody on board is responsible. And so they cast lots to find out who. It was a common enough way of working things out.

And the God who caused the storm to be there in the first place has no problem in organizing things so the lot falls on Jonah.

Jonah is highlighted. And so the attention of the sailors turns to Jonah. And they have lots of questions for him.

Who's responsible for this problem? You or someone else? What do you do? Where do you come from? What's your country? Who are your people? We want to know.

[13:03] This is urgent. We need an answer here. And so finally, in verse 9, we hear from Jonah for the very first time.

In a book that bears his name, he speaks for the very first time. He says, I'm a Hebrew.

The Gentile name for God's people. And I fear the Lord. Or I believe in the Lord is the way the NIV has it. But the ESV translates it fear. And I think that's important.

And I think that's important that we catch this word, fear. I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Now, this is irony again, of course.

Because although he says these words, at this point, he doesn't really believe him. He doesn't really fear the Lord. He's looking out for himself.

[14:11] But the sailors, on the other hand, are terrified. The literal translation is, they fear with a very great fear.

They are incredulous. They're shocked.

The main thrust of this chapter, this first chapter of Jonah, is captured in verses 9 and 10. Jonah said to them, I'm a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made sea and the dry land. And then the sailors feared with a very great fear. Jonah says, I fear the Lord, although he doesn't really.

And the sailors fear with a very great fear. And their fear is very real. So we're left with the question, well, what does it mean to really fear the Lord?

[15:47] To fear God? We read in 1 Peter that we are to conduct ourselves as foreigners in reverent fear.

And that gives us an idea of what fearing God is. Fear of the Lord means realizing the relative natures of God and us.

God is great. He is powerful. He's the ruler and controller of the universe. And he's also pure and holy.

A perfection in whose presence no evil or impurity can ever exist. That's God.

God is really real and right. But what is amazing is that God reaches out to those who recognize who he is and who we are.

[17:28] That is, those who fear him. And he's provided through Jesus a way to be cleansed of that contamination of sin.

All we have to do is accept his cleansing through faith. Now those of us who have accepted this way back to God are said to be those who fear God still.

Because although we now have relationship with him, we never forget who he is and who we are. We have reverent fear.

It's the natural way of living for the people of God. The fear of God. It includes worshipping him, being thankful to him, and obeying him.

In Psalm 111, verse 10, it says, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All who follow his precepts have good understanding.

[18:39] To him belongs eternal praise. Fearing God means obeying him, following his precepts. Hebrews 12 tells us, Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful.

And so worship God, acceptably with reverence and fear and awe, is the translation.

For our God is a consuming fire. You see, fearing God means obeying him, being thankful to him, and worshipping him.

All things which, sadly, Jonah neglected to do here. Jonah claimed to be a person who feared the Lord.

He had all the benefits of being one of the people of God. But at this time, he didn't worship him. He didn't even acknowledge him.

[19:55] Even when God's power was so forcefully displayed during the storm.

He didn't thank God. He didn't obey God. In fact, quite the opposite. He tried to run away from God. God was telling him things that weren't agreeable to him.

And so Jonah decided, as we often do when we come across someone we disagree with, to just, in effect, cancel God.

God's call to Jonah was inconvenient and disagreeable to Jonah, so Jonah decided that he knew better. He was putting himself in the place of God.

God's call to Jonah was a very unfortunate and dangerous place to be.

[21 : 06] So we get to the resolution of the problem on the ship. The sailors appear to Jonah to tell him what to do. Jonah said, What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?

They recognize Jonah's God more than he does. They recognize the authority of Jonah's prophet more than he does.

They'll be God's prophet Jonah more than he does. And Jonah's reply is shocking. It's unexpected. Pick me up and throw me into the sea, he replied, and it will become calm. Jonah would rather die than repent.

He would rather die than pray to God. Jonah is stubborn. You see, he knows of God's forgiveness and grace. Later on in the book, we have him explaining himself.

[22 : 18] In chapter 4, verse 2, he says to God, I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Jonah knows all this stuff, but he refuses. Nope, I'd rather die. Chuck me into the water.

I'm done. I don't want to... Astounding. And the sailors, again, are more righteous than Jonah.

They try to save Jonah's life, even though he's been ready to abandon them to the storm, even though Jonah has been ready to give up his own life, but to no avail.

And the sailors appeal to the Lord, cry out to the Lord where Jonah wouldn't. Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life.

[23 : 26] Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man. For you, Lord, have done as you have pleased. Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

Jonah finds what we all find. But disobeying God and making ourselves the center of things lands us in deep water.

And again, here's the amazing thing. This isn't the end of the book. You see, if it were me, I'd have let Jonah drown, miserable sod that he was.

But God is gracious and patient and forgiving. So come back next week. There's more.

And in verse 16, we see something amazing. The sailors are again said to fear the Lord with very great fear. They greatly feared the Lord and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

[24 : 44] They became Yahweh worshippers. They were converted. They became what Jonah refused to be.

By contrast to Jonah, the sailors really do fear God when they realize the power, his power and their own sinfulness. And when they're delivered, what do they do?

They thank him. They worship him in recognition of that deliverance. God's grace and mercy defy any logic of ours anyhow.

God brings them to faith despite his prophet, not because of his prophet. Well, what does this mean for us?

Well, firstly, we see from this story that the Lord, Yahweh, is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

[26 : 03] He's the creator and controller of the universe and everything in it. He's sovereign over storms at sea and he's sovereign over events on the land. There's no point in relying on any other God, like luck or wealth or pleasure or possessions or family or any God you choose to name.

But he alone controls the natural elements, the stock market, the economies, politics, even politicians, etc., etc.

And he is the great and holy God. There is no other worth fearing, appealing to or relying on.

Secondly, God has a word for this world that must be delivered. He had a message for Nineveh and he has a message for those who are by nature his enemies today.

God goes to great extents to make sure that his word goes forth. the word even became flesh and dwelt amongst us as we remembered at Christmas.

[27 : 33] Jesus, that word incarnate, died for us to bring us to God as our New Testament reading from 1 Peter emphasized.

God's mission mission to take his word to a needy world has been extended not just to prophets, but in these days to each one of us.

And third, God is merciful and his grace extends to deliver us from our empty way of life, as 1 Peter says, just as he did to those sailors.

But fourthly, and most, I think, most challengingly, we who know we have received the benefits of being God's people, like Jonah, we who claim that we fear the Lord, we who are Christian people who have accepted God's word in Christ.

Are we doing a Jonah, so to speak? Do we claim to fear the Lord and to follow Christ, but instead live as though that was not true?

[29 : 07] Do we live in light of our profession, or do we turn and run from the responsibility to carry God's word to the world?

Now, we might do that in all sorts of ways, by not acknowledging him, by pretending that we don't know him when it's inconvenient, by not taking time to read his word and pray each day, by treating our Christian brothers and sisters as less than honored and respected family, through gossip, neglect, or even unkindness, by petty acts of dishonesty, by filling our minds and our screens with unwholesome things.

The list could go on. You see, we do a Jonah in all sorts of small and sneaky ways.

It sneaks up on us. But if so, if that's the case, let us be quick to repent and turn back to God.

Seek his forgiveness and call on him because of his mercy. Let's not continue to do a Jonah and stubbornly refuse to repent, refuse to pray to him.

[30 : 36] I want to pray the words from Psalm 86, 11, for all of us by way of conclusion.

Let's pray. Teach us your way, Lord, that we might rely on your faithfulness name. Give us undivided hearts that we might fear your name.

We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen.