

Fleeing or Fearing God

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Date: 04 January 2026

Preacher: Peter Young

[0:00] Well, Happy New Year. As we turn to look at this passage in God's Word, let's pray together. Lord God, as we turn to your word now, we pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts would be acceptable in your sight. Would you show us what you want us to hear and help us to see how it applies to our lives and give us grace to do what you show us.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, what are you expecting this year? What are you looking forward? What are you expecting to happen in 2026? I guess there'll be a number of different things. Some will be mundane. Some will be exciting.

But however wild they may be, I can probably say that most of us will encounter some things that are unexpected in 2026.

Well, today we start looking at the Book of Jonah. And as most people know, the Book of Jonah was all about a big fish. Well, actually it's not. That's part of the story, but it's only part of the story.

And what strikes me when I read the Book of Jonah is that it's full of unexpected things.

[1:57] Things and events. And even the style is unexpected. Of all of the minor prophets in the Old Testament, Jonah is the only narrative one. It's the only story.

All the rest are proclamations. We're going to find some unexpected things as we look at Jonah.

Not just today, but in the weeks to come as we look at it over the next four weeks. So that's some unexpected things, at least in 2026 anyhow.

But let's look at the start of Jonah. And immediately we find something unexpected. You see, the usual pattern in the Old Testament was for God to call a prophet to do a task and the prophet would then go and do it. Well, actually, in some cases there was a little bit of pushback.

You remember Moses when he was at the non-burning bush and he was given a task by God and he said, no, no, no, no, no, I can't speak. I'm not. I can't go to Pharaoh, et cetera, et cetera.

[3:17] And he gave lots and lots of excuses, but in the end he did what God told him. And Jeremiah, you remember, Jeremiah was told to go and do and proclaim a certain thing.

And he said, no, no, not me. I'm only a youth. I'm too young. God said, that's nonsense. And convinced Jeremiah and Jeremiah went and did what God commanded him.

Well, unexpectedly, Jonah does not fit this pattern because God says to him, go to the great city of Nineveh, preach against it because its wickedness has come before me.

And what does Jonah do? He ran away. There's no pushback. He doesn't even speak to God. He just disobeys.

Surprisingly, Jonah doesn't want to have anything to do with God. He just wants to get out of there. This is kind of shocking.

[4 : 39] This guy is supposed to be a prophet of God. If we actually have another reference to Jonah, in the book of 2 Kings, it's talking about the wicked king, Jeroboam II.

He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebohammath to the Dead Sea in accordance with the word of the Lord. So he did do one good thing. But in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant, Jonah, son of Amitai, prophet from Gehepha.

This is the same Jonah. He's a prophet, which makes it even more shocking that he just hears God's word and runs away.

Now, in a way, the reaction of Jonah is a little bit understandable because God's call was so unexpected and shocking in itself.

Back in verse 1. Go to the city of Nineveh. The Ninevites. The Ninevites.

[5 : 59] The Ninevites were enemies of God's people. Not just enemies, but they were violently enemies of God's people.

It's like saying, go into the ISIS camp and preach against ISIS. It's shocking. The Ninevites were hated.

They were a fierce enemy of God's people. They were most likely to kill Jonah on sight if he was lucky because they had a reputation of cruelty and bloodthirstiness that was unrivaled at the time.

Go to Nineveh. So Jonah flees. But actually, before we leave this little section, let's look at verse 1 again because there's a little bit of irony in how Jonah is identified.

See, amittai means faithfulness, which is kind of a little bit of a joke, really, given the contents of this book.

[7 : 15] In Hebrew, if you wanted to define a quality in a person, you would sometimes call him the son of that quality.

So the son of righteousness for a very righteous person. So to call Jonah the son of faithfulness is kind of comical, given the contents of his story.

But anyhow, Jonah heads for Tarshish. Now, Tarshish is about as far away as he could imagine.

It's probably a town on the coast of Spain or somewhere. The other side of the Mediterranean Sea, as far as imaginably possible.

But notice that God was calling him to go east to Nineveh. Jonah went west to the coast and beyond.

[8 : 26] Now, old Jonah probably knew that he couldn't escape from God.

There are lots of scriptures that tell us that wherever we go, God is there. Psalm 139 comes to mind. Jonah must have known that deep down.

But that didn't stop him from running. So he gets on a boat at the port of Joppa. He pays a fare. It must have been a considerable fare to go that far.

And he heads for Tarshish. He is serious about running away from God. And so they're sailing off into the distance.

But he isn't sailing away from God at all. God hurls a great wind on the sea, is how the original language tells us.

[9 : 39] It's such a violent storm that the ship is about to break up. Now, the sailors aboard, of course, know all about storms at sea.

But this one even has them worried, has them afraid. They are fearful. They're so afraid that each one turns to his own God.

They hope that one of them, anyone, will respond. And at the same time, they did as much as they could practically to ensure their safety, throwing the cargo overboard even, in order that the ship might not break up.

They're desperate. They're scared. They're really scared. But not Jonah. Jonah doesn't join them. He doesn't appeal to his God, the only God who could have helped.

Jonah, you see, had closed his ears to God when he was called. And now he closes his eyes.

[10:56] He gets down away from the storm as far as he can go, closes his eyes, and goes into a deep sleep. He doesn't care for Ninevites.

He doesn't really even care for the people on the boat. Hardly even cares for himself, it seems. And the captain of the boat finds him, sleeping.

He calls him out. And the words of the captain contain surprise. How can you sleep? Can't you see we're about to shipwreck?

That's not a good thing. How can you sleep? Go. Then he rebukes him. He says, get up. Call on the name of your God. The duty of everybody on board was to pray as hard as they could to whoever they could think of to pray to.

But there's also a bit of an omission of failure here as well. Because he says, maybe your God will work.

[12:20] Nothing else has. The other gods haven't done it. They couldn't help. But the sailors figure out, well, there's somebody who's done something wrong.

And that's why this is all happening. So they decide to find out who it is. And they cast lots. That was a common way of finding out things, of working things out.

And the God who hurled the storm upon them is surely powerful enough to manipulate the lot so that it falls on Jonah.

So once they determine that it's Jonah who is the reason for their calamity, they're full of questions.

Who's responsible for this problem? You or somebody else? What do you do? Where are you from? What's your country? Who are your people? They're desperate. They need, this is urgent.

[13:37] They need answers. They need answers. They need answers. They need answers. This storm needs to stop. And so in verse 9, we finally get Jonah speaking.

The book bears his name and he only starts to speak way down in verse 9. Here's what he says. Now, the ESV translates it as fear.

The NIV, I believe in. But actually the word is fear. I fear the Lord, the God of heaven. Who made the sea and the dry land.

Jonah doesn't really, at this point, fear the Lord at all.

But not so the sailors. They were terrified. Literally, they fear with a very great fear. They're incredulous.

[15:03] What have you done? The comment that they knew that he was running away, that Jonah was running away from Yahweh, shows that they weren't really asking for information.

They're shocked. They're shocked. What have you done? What are you doing? They're shocked by Jonah's godlessness.

I think the main thrust of this chapter of Jonah is encapsulated in these two verses, verses 9 and 10.

Jonah says to them, I'm a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. And then the men feared with very great fear.

Jonah says, I fear Yahweh, though he doesn't really at this stage. The sailors fear with a very great fear and their fear is very real.

[16:21] But what does it mean to fear God? We saw in 1 Peter reading that we are encouraged by Peter to live out our time as foreigners here in reverent fear.

I think that fearing God means realizing who God really is and realizing who we really are. Recognizing the relative natures of God and us. God is great. He's powerful. He's the ruler and controller of the universe.

He's the one who made the sea and the dry land. But he's also holy and pure. He is a perfection in whose presence no evil or impurity can exist.

And we? We're sinful and weak. Contaminated by sin and powerless to cleanse ourselves of it. There's a distance between those two, isn't there?

[17:53] We're on the wrong side of the equation here. Fear is the right attitude if we realize those two things.

But the amazing thing is, the unexpected, the surprising, is that God has reached out to those who recognize who he is and who we are.

That is, those who fear him. And he has provided a way through Jesus for us to be cleansed of the contamination of sin.

All we have to do is accept that cleansing by faith. That doesn't mean we stop fearing him.

You see, those who have accepted this way back to a relationship with God are said to be those who fear God because we still understand who we are and who he is.

[19:10] He may have been gracious to us, but he is still holy God. The natural way for us to live as people of God who fear God is to worship him, to be thankful to him, and to obey him.

Let me show you in a couple of verses, one from the Old Testament, from Psalm 111. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

It's the starting point. And all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.

Fearing the Lord involves obeying him, following his precepts. Hebrews 12.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful. And so worship God acceptably with reverence and fear, or reverence and awe, as the translation has it.

[20:30] For God is a consuming fire. For God is a consuming fire. Obedience, thankfulness, and worship.

None of which Jonah was particularly doing at this stage. Jonah claimed to be a person who feared God. He had all the benefits of the people of God.

But at this time, he didn't worship God. Or even acknowledge him. Even though his power was being so forcefully demonstrated in this storm.

He didn't thank God. He didn't obey God. In fact, the opposite, as we saw before. He ran away. God was telling him, you see, that things that were disagreeable to him.

He didn't like it. And so Jonah decided, I know better. He put himself in the place of God.

[21:56] He was following. He was fearing. He was being his own God. In this instance.

So we get to the resolution of this storm. And the sailors appeal to Jonah to tell him, tell them what to do.

What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us? They recognize that the God that he's running away from is powerful.

He's the one who caused this storm. They recognize God more and God's prophet more than Jonah does. Jonah's reply is unexpected and shocking.

Pick me up and throw me into the sea. And it will become calm. I know it's my fault. Just get rid of me.

[23 : 09] He would rather die than repent. He'd rather die than pray to God. He's stubborn. He knows of God's forgiveness and grace.

We see that later in the book. In fact, he complains about it when he explains himself to God. Let's have a look at Jonah 4, verse 2. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents and sending calamity.

He's complaining about the gracious nature of God. He's so stubborn. His own pride, his own image is more important to him than God, than turning to God, than even his own life.

Throw me into the sea. I'm prepared to drown for this. But again, the sailors are more righteous than Jonah.

they try to save Jonah's life, even though he has said, I want to die rather than repent. They do their best to row back to land, but they can't.

[24 : 35] Jonah was ready to abandon them. They aren't ready to abandon Jonah. and they appeal to the Lord where Jonah does not.

Please, Lord, Yahweh, don't let us die for this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man. For you, Lord, have done as you please. They recognize God's power in all of this.

Jonah and then they throw Jonah overboard. And the raging sea grew calm. And Jonah finds what all of us find, disobeying God and making ourselves the center of things, lands us in deep water.

And again, here's the amazing thing. Just as Michelle said, this isn't the end of the book. If it was up to me, I would have said, let him drown.

Miserable sod. But God is gracious and patient and forgiving.

[25 : 59] And he doesn't, even though we are miserable sods, he doesn't give up on us. So come back next week.

That's the application there. In verse 16, again, unexpected, the sailors are said to fear the Lord with a very great fear again.

But this time, it's a fear of worship. They offer sacrifice to the Lord and make vows to him. They become Yahweh worshippers.

They're converted. They became what Jonah refused to be, a follower of Yahweh. God They really do fear the Lord.

When they realize the power of Yahweh and their own sinfulness, they turn to him. And when they're delivered, what do they do?

[27 : 10] They thank and worship Yahweh in recognition of his deliverance. God's grace and God's mercy defy all logic.

It's amazing. God brings them to faith, not because of his prophet, but despite his prophet. It's an amazing end to this part of the story.

But what does all this mean to us? Well, firstly, we can see from this story that the Lord, Yahweh, is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

He's the creator and controller of the universe and everything in it. He's sovereign over storms at sea and events on land. There's no point in relying on any other God, like luck or wealth or pleasure or possessions or family or anything else that we like to make as our little gods.

He alone controls the natural elements and the stock market and the economies and the politics and everything that happens here on earth and everywhere else.

[28 : 38] He is the only God worth following. He's the only God. Full stop.

Second, God has a word for this world that must be delivered. He had a message for the Ninevites. And he has a message for those who are by nature his enemies today.

And God goes to great lengths to ensure that his word goes forth. This Christmas, we've been reminded again that God's word became flesh and dwelt amongst us so that we would behold his glory, the glory as of the only Son of the Father.

The word Jesus, the word incarnate died for us to bring us to God.

God's word will not be stopped. God's mission to take his word to the world isn't just for prophets anymore.

[30 : 08] It's for all of us, for all of his people. It must be delivered. Third, God is merciful and extends grace to deliver us from what our reading in 1 Peter described as our empty way of life handed down from our ancestors.

He will save us even as he saves those pagan sailors. Fourthly, and I think most challengingly, we know, we who know that we have received the benefits of God's people, like Jonah, who claim that we fear the Lord, like Jonah, who are Christian people, who have accepted God's word in Christ, are we doing a Jonah?

Are we like Jonah? Do we claim to follow the Lord and to follow Christ and to fear him, but instead live as though that was not true?

Do we live in light of our profession of faith, or do we run from the responsibility to carry God's word to the world? And we can do that in all sorts of ways, of course.

Not only by not acknowledging him or pretending that we don't know him when it's inconvenient, by not taking the time to read his word and pray every day, by treating our Christian brothers and sisters as less than honoured and respected family members through gossip, neglect, or even unkindness.

[32 : 08] We can do that. We can not fear him through petty acts of dishonesty, by filling our minds and our screens with all sorts of unwholesome things.

We can do it in a myriad different ways, can't we? Be unfaithful to him. And as we do that, then, let us be quick to repent and turn back to him, to seek his forgiveness and call upon him because he's promised that he will forgive us.

Let's not continue to do a Jonah and stubbornly refuse to repent, refuse to pray to him. The offer is always there.

Come back. He loves us. I want to pray for all of us.

I want to pray the words of Psalm 86, verse 11. Let's pray. Teach us your ways, Lord, that we may rely on your faithfulness.

[33 : 43] Give us undivided hearts that we may all fear your name. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Amen. Amen.