

# The One that Got Away

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[ 0 : 00 ] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 27th of May 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled The One That Got Away and is from Jonah chapter 1 verse 1 through to chapter 2 verse 10.

Heavenly Father we thank you that you speak to us through your words in scripture. We pray that you'll do so now that we may not only understand but also live and apply what we learn so that our lives bring glory to Jesus Christ.

Amen. Roald Dahl wrote a series of short stories that were adapted in recent years for television called Tales of the Unexpected and the story of Jonah and the big fish would classify as a tale of the unexpected.

Our trouble is that we're so familiar with Jonah being rescued by the great fish that for us it's expected. But the story as we'll see this week and next week is riddled with unexpected things.

[ 1 : 13 ] The opening verse is unsurprising. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai saying that's how many of the books of prophets begin or with words similar to that.

God speaks to a prophet. He's named. He lived in the 8th century BC. His name is mentioned in another part of the Old Testament that tells us in effect that he was alive about 750 BC thereabouts.

But what God says to Jonah is unexpected in verse 2 because often the word of God would come to a prophet and say preach to the people of Israel or the people of Judah and say this, this and this.

But God's words to Jonah are to go and to go to a foreign country. Not to the people of God but to the people of the Assyrians to the great city Nineveh which was one of its major cities later on its capital.

A major city in what would be northern Iraq I think today. The Assyrians were the major world power of the time and a major enemy of God's people as well.

[ 2 : 28 ] So God's saying to Jonah to get up and go to this people is like saying to say an American politician go to Baghdad today.

And go to Baghdad not as a sort of undercover agent and keep out of the way and be safe but rather go to Baghdad stand in the main square outside Saddam Hussein's palace and start preaching against the people of Iraq.

That is it's not a safe mission that Jonah is being called to go on. No wonder he goes the opposite direction. God says to him in effect go north and east and Jonah turns around and goes south and east and west.

So in verse 3 we are told that Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish which is probably a town, a port in Spain and it is probably about as far as the known world extended to the west in Jonah's day close to or maybe just beyond the rock of Gibraltar and the straits of Gibraltar out into the unknown beyond the Mediterranean.

So Jonah is going as far away as possible from Nineveh as far away as possible from his own people as far away as possible from God.

[ 3 : 50 ] He is fleeing and he goes down not in the direction of Nineveh but in the opposite direction south and west to Joppa about where Tel Aviv is today.

He found a ship going to Tarshish presumably looked around for the ship that was going as far away as possible, as quickly as possible and he paid a fare, probably relatively expensive and went on board to go with him to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord.

Notice how that's stressed. He flees to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord and then the end of the verse repeats the same thing again. That is it's quite emphatic that Jonah is trying to get out of God's way yet as far away from the presence of God as possible.

But of course there's no escaping God. We know that. Probably Jonah knew that. The psalmist knew that. What happens to Jonah is an illustration in one sense of a well-known psalm, Psalm 139.

The psalmist says, Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you're there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

[ 5 : 02 ] If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, Tarshish in Jonah's day, there you are, even your right hand. Your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast.

What happens for Jonah is what the psalmist said. You cannot flee in the end from the presence of God if I go up to heaven or down to Sheol or to the farthest extent of the sea, God is there.

And that's what Jonah finds. For he's in the boat and they set sail from Joppa heading across the Mediterranean towards Tarshish and there's a storm, a great storm.

But this is not just the natural events of winds and waves. Verse 4 tells us that the Lord, that is the name Yahweh, when Lord is in capital letters in the Old Testament, it's the personal name of God, Yahweh or Jehovah, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, the God whom we worship.

That God hurled 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 and it is God who's done it.

[ 6 : 16 ] And there's a sense in which God's expressing or venting his anger here because he hurls the storm at the sea. Something that you do with great anger.

When I was thinking of God hurling this wind, I remember when I was about 12 years old. I have a bad temper at times. Hard to imagine, I know. But I had one of those little plastic airfix models of the Cutty Sark and I'd spent all my summer holidays putting this thing together.

You know, the things that have got hundreds of pieces and you paint them all and you glue them all on and right near the end, the mast broke. And I was so angry that I picked this up and I hurled it across my bedroom.

Plus I got into quite a deal of trouble from my father about that. But I've inherited my temper from my father. Not long afterwards, something came flying through the garage window, smashing the window as he did the Cutty Sark incident on something else.

But that's the picture I have of God here hurling this storm. That is an expression of great anger against Jonah for disobeying him, being very blatant in his rebellion of God's charge to him to go to Nineveh.

[ 7 : 31 ] So great is the storm that these experienced seamen are fearing for their life. The ship is threatening to break up. Each of the mariners were afraid and each cried to his God.

That is, they're pagans, they're not Israelites. By and large, the Israelites were not seagoing people. And each of them had a God. That may reflect the fact that they've come from different pagan countries, so they've got local gods to whom they pray.

It may also reflect the fact that in the ancient world, in pagan society, people would often have their favourite or personal God to whom they pray. So the sense here is that they are so worried about this storm that they're all just praying to every possible God that they could find.

All their own personal and local gods trying somehow to find a solution to this great storm that is upon the sea. Notice that they also take practical measures because they throw cargo overboard as well.

So even they think that maybe their prayers won't be enough. They're throwing the cargo over so that the ship has got every chance of staying afloat in this terrible storm. And meanwhile, Jonah, who is a paying passenger, so therefore not obliged to be part of the crew throwing things overboard and praying, he's downstairs asleep in the steerage section of the boat.

[ 8 : 53 ] The captain finds him while he's there as they're throwing cargo and looking for things to toss out. And the captain says to him in verse 6, what are you doing sound asleep?

Now maybe a rebuke, come on, you shouldn't be asleep, you should be praying to your God, which is what he then goes on to say, get up and call on your God. It may also be an element of surprise, how can you be asleep in such a storm?

So get up, call on your God. Perhaps the God will spare us a thought so that we do not perish. I think we're meant to notice something about the captain's words because as he says to Jonah, get up and call upon your God, he begins with the same words that God said in verse 2, get up and go to Nineveh.

And maybe we're meant to just see in association. God has spoken to Jonah and he's disobeyed and now ironically through the words of a pagan ocean sea captain, the same initial words at least are spoken, get up and call on your God.

Maybe there's a sense in which God is still speaking to Jonah but now through the words of a pagan sea captain. It also hints that the sea, the crew's prayers have been ineffective.

[ 10 : 19 ] They've all called upon their gods and the storm is still raging. Jonah, call upon your God, maybe your God, perhaps will hear the prayer and do something.

Let's get every support from every God that we can possibly find. These men are desperate. They then roll dice to cast lots to find out what's causing this storm, something that was typical in the ancient world, a few instances of it in the Old Testament where people would cast lots, probably two stones that would be roughly flat and round so that you would toss them, they'd fall one way or the other and maybe they were marked or painted so that if they matched each other with a positive, then that would be an indication of guidance from the gods or from God and they've cast stones in verse 7 or cast lots and the lot falls on Jonah.

So presumably they've gone around for each member of the crew and each person on the boat and the lot has somehow indicated that Jonah is responsible for this storm. So they say to him, tell us why this calamity has come upon us.

What's your occupation? Where do you come from? What's your country? Of what people are you? A salvo of questions to him. They realise that he somehow is the cause of this storm but they want to discover why.

What's going on here? Who are you? And so Jonah replies in verse 9, I'm a Hebrew, he says. That's an Israelite but Hebrew is the word that was generally used to speak to foreigners.

[ 11 : 52 ] I'm a Hebrew. I worship the Lord. That is, I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. That's an extraordinary statement.

It has a hollow ring because here is Jonah fleeing this God but he says, I worship him or literally I fear him. The thing is, he doesn't really.

It's lip service only to this God. But the other thing about his statement, I worship Yahweh, the Lord of heaven who made the sea and the dry land is that Jonah says, I know who's causing this storm.

You're right, it's me because the God whom I worship is the God who made the sea and the dry land. He's the Lord of heaven. He's not just one God among many but he's the sovereign God of all.

And the sailors' response is unexpected, I think. They say, or no, in verse 10, we're told about them, they were even more afraid. They're afraid of the storm because it's such a terrible storm.

[ 12 : 59 ] But now when they hear that Jonah worships the God who made the sea and the dry land, the Lord of heaven, they are even more afraid because they realise the sovereignty of the God who is behind the storm.

And so they say to him, what have you done? The very question that God asked Adam and Eve when they sinned in the Garden of Eden? What have you done, Jonah, to provoke such a great God to such anger and wrath is in effect what they're saying.

They knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. He told them so, we're told at the end of verse 10. And now they realised which God it is that he's trying to flee from.

Now here I think we find a contrast that gets sharper later in the chapter. Pagan sailors is fearing God but a prophet of God who ought to know better, not fearing him really at all but fleeing instead.

That is, Jonah's sin is shown to be even, to be so bad by the contrast of an unexpectedly fearful people, pagan sailors. Their right response to God sheds light on Jonah's wrong response to God.

[ 14 : 18 ] And all the while the storm keeps increasing in intensity. So they say to him in verse 11, what shall we do to you that the sea may quieten down for us for the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.

All the time that this is going on and the lots are being cast and the prayers being offered, the sea is getting worse and worse and the sailors are getting more and more alarmed and more desperate.

And Jonah says to them, pick me up and hurl me into the sea. Then the sea will quieten down for you. For I know it's because of me that this great storm has come upon you.

Jonah's words are astonishing, I think. He is more willing to die than to repent of his sin. He is more willing to die than pray.

He doesn't have any expectation of God's grace or mercy to him. He knows that he has been blatantly disobedient to God, going the opposite direction.

[ 15 : 23 ] And now when he realises that this storm which threatens the sailors and his life on the boat is from God because of his disobedience, he doesn't say to the sailors, I will pray to God.

Even though the captain's told him to pray, he hasn't. He doesn't say, I'm going to repent of my sin. I'll offer to go to Nineveh. Then the storm will calm down. No. He doesn't have an expectation of God's grace or mercy.

He says, throw me overboard. In effect, let me die. That's what I deserve. And he's right. He's unable to outrun God.

He's unable to flee God. And his game is up. But these sailors don't throw him overboard, at least initially. They act with, in a sense, great nobility of character.

They decide to try and row to the land in order to preserve Jonah's life. But they're unable to. God prevents it happening. They rowed hard, in verse 13, to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.

[ 16 : 35 ] And so in the end, they realised that they have to throw Jonah overboard, as he said. But before doing, they pray. Jonah is yet to pray.

He's a prophet of God and he's not praying to his God. But these pagan sailors, who've already begun to fear the God of Jonah and the God of the Bible, now pray to that God.

In effect, they're converted. In effect, they realise who is the sovereign God. And it's not all the gods that they've been praying to at all. But the God called Yahweh or Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament, the God of Israel, the God of Jonah, the God of the Bible.

And so they pray, 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, O Yahweh, have done as it pleased you.

They know who the boss is and they, unlike Jonah, fear him and they, unlike Jonah, pray to him. You see, God is making his point to Jonah and to us by the contrast between these sailors and Jonah.

[ 17 : 47 ] Jonah's the one that we would expect to pray. Jonah's the one we would expect to ask for repentance and find grace and mercy. He comes from the people of God, from Israel.

He's a prophet of God. But no, unexpectedly, it's pagan sailors who pray, not Jonah. And this furious storm has led them, the sailors, to godly fear, not the person we would expect, namely Jonah.

And maybe one other little point, in a sense, anticipating what we see next week. God had told Jonah in verse 2 to go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach against it for their wickedness has come up to me.

That is, their evil is the word. When the sailors describe the storm, they use the same word. They say in verse 8 to Jonah, tell us why this evil has come upon us.

Our translation has got calamity, it's the same word. In effect, I think the use of the same word is making this point, that Nineveh was regarded obviously as evil and wicked.

[ 18 : 59 ] Jonah would have nothing to do with it. But Jonah's disobedience against God has created another evil or wickedness or calamity. That is, Jonah is in the same category as the evil enemies of God's people by being disobedient to God.

We'll see next week how God deals with Nineveh and again with Jonah. So the sailors hurl him overboard in verse 15 and the sea ceases from its raging and then the sailors fear the Lord even more.

Firstly, they feared him because of the storm. Now they fear him because the storm ceases and the wind is calm. They offer a sacrifice. Presumably there are animals on board and they could offer a sacrifice on board.

Maybe it's meaning that when they get to dry land eventually they do offer a sacrifice. They offer a vow to God, to Yahweh, to the Lord. These are people who it seems are converted, who come to faith and fear in the living God, Yahweh.

In a sense they are now model people of God and the contrast with Jonah is even starker. Disobedient, he's now floundering and drowning in the water.

[ 20 : 19 ] An extraordinary mercy of God that these pagan sailors can come to faith in God through the terrible storm and its ceasing.

They pray to God and in effect he answers their prayers, pagans though they are. Well meanwhile of course as we all well know but completely unexpected if you're reading the story for the first time, the Lord provides, not just natural coincidence, the Lord provides a large fish to swallow up Jonah.

We don't know that it's a whale, that's just tradition because it's the largest of the sort of fishes or sea animals in the world. I'm not sure that there are many whales in the Mediterranean. But nonetheless a large fish swallows up Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Now most people pray in a crisis. Even people who are not Christians pray in a crisis. Sometimes they do statistics on the general population and I think it's something like 80% of people acknowledge that when things go really badly they will pray.

They may not know to whom they pray but they pray. Maybe for some in some vain hope that someone somewhere will hear their prayer. At last Jonah prays.

[ 21 : 44 ] He's had every opportunity to do so through a storm that has got worse and worse and worse. He's had opportunity when the captain said pray to your God. He's had opportunity when the sailor said what shall we do to you?

And even when he was thrown in the water it seems he did not pray. But now three days in the belly of a fish finally he hits rock bottom and at last he prays.

Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish saying and then come words that are very similar to bits and pieces of the Psalms. Quite probably Jonah who knows the Psalms has in a sense strung together this prayer using expressions that come out of the book of Psalms.

It is an extraordinary prayer given his disobedience and sustained disobedience all through chapter 1 but like the prodigal son I guess finally he's come to his senses and prayed.

He acknowledges in verses 2 and 3 that God is sovereign and all these events have been God's doing. I called to the Lord out of my distress and he answered me out of the belly of Sheol that is the place of the dead not hell as we might have negative connotations of hell but the general place of the dead as far away from God really as you could go although even there God is as Psalm 139 said out of the belly of Sheol he says that is the jaws of death we might say I cried and you heard my voice you cast me into the deep not really the sailors hurling me overboard God it's you who did that in the end I know that into the heart of the seas and the flood surrounded me all your waves and your billows passed over me that is I'm drowning I'm about to die then I said I'm driven away from your sight which is a little bit ironic because it's Jonah who's been fleeing from God's sight but he says

[ 23 : 49 ] I was driven away from your sight how shall I look again upon your holy temple this is the one who's tried to get as far away from the holy temple as possible the waters closed in over me the deep surrounded me weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains that is at the ocean floor in effect where the land the roots of the mountains are at the bottom of the ocean where the land eventually will come out of the ocean and become dry land mountains I went down he says yes he went down to Joppa initially and then when he got in the boat he went down into the hold of the boat to sleep and then the sailors threw him down into the sea and now he says I went down to the land to the bottom of the ocean he could go no further down I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever to death itself virtually he's saying and then in verse 6 halfway through comes the turning point yet yet you

God that is brought up my life from the pit from Sheol from the place of the dead from the jaws of death my life was ebbing away he goes on to say in verse 7 and I remembered the Lord just in the nick of time he remembers the Lord and prays why he hadn't done so earlier who knows but just in time he prays I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you into your holy temple he's saying in effect God I was trying to flee from your presence but I know I can't because even here in the belly of a fish at the bottom of the Mediterranean sea my prayer comes to your holy temple back in Jerusalem where you dwell I cannot get outside your presence God is in effect what he's saying but now with thankfulness and then he says with words that are almost tinged with irony or humour those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty perhaps he's reflecting upon himself fleeing from

God as being a worshipper of vain idols maybe he's reflecting upon the sailors who prayed to their vain idols without effect when the storm came up and maybe ironically he's reflecting that the sailors in the end prayed to God and were answered and he kept refusing but I with the voice of thanksgiving he says in verse 9 will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay just as the sailors had done at the end of chapter 1 so at the end of chapter 2 Jonah will make a sacrifice when he's rescued and will make a vow and keep his vow to God and then his song or psalm finishes with a triumphant note deliverance or salvation rescue if you like belongs to the Lord not just that God is able to rescue but that any deliverance any salvation any rescue belongs to Yahweh the God of the Bible not to any other God that is the way this is expressed there's an exclusivism about it it's not that any old God can save and it happens to be this time

Jonah's God but that only Yahweh the Lord can save and that is what Jonah is saying confidently will happen he's still in the belly of a fish saying these words but like the Psalms generally that are crying out about the situation and circumstance that befalls the Psalmist this is a person who has confidence that God will hear and will restore their fortunes time and again in the Psalms you see that my God my God why have you forsaken me but the Psalmist knows that God hasn't because the end of the Psalm finishes with confidence that God will hear and will answer the dilemma that the person faces so to hear Jonah Jonah's rescue is unexpected grace and mercy he may be an Israelite and he may be a prophet of God but he does not deserve to be rescued by God and the story has made that very clear it's made it clear by showing the contrast between

Jonah and the sailors Jonah has had every opportunity prompted by pagan sailors to pray to God to turn back to God and he's refused and steadfastly and consistently at every point he has refused to pray he's refused to repent and he's ended up at the bottom of the ocean at the end of his life and then he prays and God in his mercy answers the prayer and rescues Jonah he doesn't deserve it that's very clear and yet God is full of unexpected grace and mercy we make a mistake if we think God's grace and mercy is logical or is limited to the people that we think ought to receive it including ourselves God's mercy and

[ 29 : 11 ] God's grace is unexpected it's illogical it's limitless it goes to people who do not deserve his grace and mercy mercy God's mercy is never deserved by anyone who receives it otherwise it would not be mercy and we like Jonah do not deserve the grace and mercy of God either but too often we presume upon it we think that somehow it is our right to receive mercy and grace from God it is not it's his free gift that is undeserved illogical and limitless as Jonah was experiencing and as we'll see next week the people of Nineveh experience as well no sin is too bad no place too far no point of life too late to receive the grace and mercy of God

Jonah who was sent east fled west but as far as the east is from the west so far God removes our sins from us that's his mercy and grace that Jonah here experiences you see the miracle is not the fish the miracle is the mercy that rescues Jonah but there's nothing fishy about this merciful God either Jesus promised his skeptics one sign they demanded signs to find out who he was and what he was on about and he said one sign will I give you it's the sign of Jonah for just as Jonah had been in the belly of a fish three days and nights and then been rescued so Jesus says he'll be in the tomb and will rise from the dead there is

God's mercy a triumph over death that brings undeserved life for those who trust in him the message of Jonah here and the message of Jesus resurrection is now is the time to pray and repent to receive mercy and grace before it's too late now is the time before it's too late and God heard Jonah's prayer last year in London I had some fish and ships they say that English fish and ships is meant to be the best in the world and I was waiting for a bus at Victoria coach station and I had some fish and ships in between buses it wasn't all that nice indeed after five minutes the whole lot got thrown up into the gutter all this undigested fish and ships I felt rather embarrassed thinking people driving past would think that I'm drunk when I wasn't well after three days this fish spews up

Jonah undigested Jonah in the belly of a fish for three days you'd imagine the fish's relief at getting rid of him especially when he's bewailing and singing psalms and so on as someone says sitting on the kidney in the fish I guess Jonah could have done worse than being thrown up on a Mediterranean beach people flocked to them for holidays but even then Jonah has not quite learned his lesson as we'll see next week he's got a long way to go and a lot more to learn and by the way of course for those who are fishermen this great big big fish got away up to