

Jonah 1

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[0:00] I'm excited to be with you as we walk into the book of Jonah together and I'm very excited that we have the prospect of joining together in the future as an outdoor service or whatever that looks like for us in the days to come.

As we as we enter into the book of Jonah if someone asked you about the book of Jonah, what would they asked what's it all about. What would you say.

The most famous this is the great fish right the book of Jonah, however. It's not about the fish right but you know when when we think about the book, you know it's a million Sunday school lessons have been taught about the fish.

It seems to be the thing that comes to mind, because it's so unusual so prominent in the in this book, but I once heard a pastor say that. That area he pointed out that the fish only gets three lines and in the entire book and I doubt that none of them are speaking lines.

The three lines are the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Number two. Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish.

[1:16] And number three. The Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. That's it. One author called the great fish a brief but notable detour.

Right. The fish is a detour in the book of Jonah, not not the point. If it's not the great fish, then then perhaps the point is the great city. Right. Jonah is sent to Nineveh.

The prophecy is about Nineveh. That the prophecy is given to Nineveh and preached there. That the prophecy is received by and heeded by Nineveh.

But Nineveh isn't the point either. The book of Jonah is not about the great city. So it's not about the great fish. It's not about, as we'll see, the great city.

The book of Jonah is about a relationship between a great God and his not so great prophet. But between the Lord and one of his stiff necked people, Jonah.

[2:16] Jonah goes on a journey. And the journey that I'm talking about here is not from Israel west into the Mediterranean towards Tarshish and east back to Israel, then northeast to Nineveh.

The journey that we are going to trace in this book is not geographical, east and west across the face of the earth. But the journey, if it has a dimension at all, the text is going to show us is vertical. We're going to start seeing it this week. And it's going to come very much to the fore next week as we dive into chapter two. And that wasn't intentionally a pun, but it works with this.

So let's, friends, let's pray to the Lord that he would open our eyes to hear what he has to say in this book, and then let's dig into it. Lord, as we still in this strange season of life come to a strange book, Lord, I pray that you would open our eyes, that you would show us who you are, Lord, because you put your self, your character, your cares and concerns on display so vividly in this book.

And Lord, as we come to the text of Jonah, I pray that you would show us ourselves as well. And I pray, Father, that you, by showing us yourself and showing us ourselves, Lord, that you would do a work in us, that we would come to know and love you more, and that we would be conformed not to Jonah's image, but to yours, so that you might be glorified in us.

[3:53] We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our King. Amen. There are three main players in Jonah chapter one. The first character we meet in the book of Jonah isn't, again, the great fish.

It's not even Jonah. The first character we meet is the Lord, right? The word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying, right? The Lord is the beginning of this narrative.

He steers the course of the whole book. He is the hero, much like the whole Bible, much like the story of all history. And since we've already said, you know, the book isn't about the great fish or the great city of Nineveh, it's about a great God and how he deals with his stubborn prophet.

And then the second person we meet is Jonah, the stubborn prophet. Now, we also read about him in 2 Kings chapter 14. He ministered in the 8th century BC in the Northern Kingdom at the time Israel was the divided kingdom, split between North and South, 10 tribes in the North where he was prophesying, and the two tribes in the South.

And this is before the fall of the Northern tribes to Assyria. And so Nineveh being the capital of Assyria, you can see why he would be, well, there might be a problem for him.

[5:11] He might have some misgivings about going to Nineveh and going to prophesy to those who, he might not yet know it, but he knows that they are a threat.

He might not know that they are going to be the ones to carry the Northern Kingdom of Israel off into captivity, but he knows that they are a threat. He knows that they are a great heathen nation. Now, the third character we meet in chapter one, again, no, it's not the fish.

We meet some sailors. And the sailors, they are also, like Nineveh, pagans. They're praying, we saw in the text, to false gods. But they are going to look a lot better than Jonah.

And from each character, we're going to learn something. Something about the Lord, something about the world, and something about ourselves. So let's begin with that first character, the Lord.

The whole narrative kicks off as the Lord instructs his prophet Jonah to call out against Nineveh. Nineveh. And the language he uses here about Nineveh, when he says that their evil has come up before him.

[6:19] And then again, in chapter three, when we see the actual prophecy that Jonah is going to give against them, that Nineveh will be overthrown. That's both of those.

Both the evil that came up before him and the overthrown idea are reminiscent. They echo both the judgment and the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah, the two great paradigmatic evils of the Old Testament.

And from what we know of antiquity, Assyria, represented again by its capital, Nineveh, which today is in northern Iraq, was indeed a very wicked empire.

Now, we know that the message is going to be, in chapter three, 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Now, that might be the fullness of the message.

Or it might be a summary of it. Or it might be an excerpt of what Jonah actually preached. But in any event, it is certainly a message of justice and judgment against Nineveh.

[7:28] Now, on one hand, it's not unusual for the Lord to have his prophets condemn pagan nations around them. If you flip back to one page before Jonah into the book of Obadiah, you'll see a condemnation of a foreign nation, Edom, for its wickedness and its stand against Israel.

But what's unique about Jonah is where his mission is to take place. Most of the prophets who prophesy against foreign nations do so from the comfort and the safety of Israel.

But God sends Jonah to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, to testify against it. Jonah knows Assyria's reputation. And I'm not sure if there's really a good modern equivalent that we can point to.

It was a rising superpower with a penchant for extreme violence. Perhaps it would be like heading to North Korea and publicly heralding a message of judgment and repentance.

There's a huge risk in that. And there's no indication in the call of Jonah that the Lord promised protection to him in the midst of his preaching. And so it might be that he's considering this a dangerous thing.

[8:47] As Pastor Mark Dever has said, there aren't any closed countries to missionaries, just countries where it's hard to preach the gospel a second time.

Now, if the Lord commanded you to go to a Taliban stronghold or something like that and to preach a message of condemnation, calling people to repentance, you might feel a bit of trepidation.

Might do not, right? But we know that Jonah's reluctance isn't actually a safety thing. He doesn't run because he fears that his ministry might fail.

He flees because he's confident that his ministry will succeed. When Nineveh repents of their wickedness and the Lord relents in his judgment, Jonah says in chapter four, he says, Oh, Lord, is it not, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

So back in chapter one. That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

[9:58] Therefore, now, oh Lord, please take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live. What's Jonah saying here?

He's saying that God is gracious and merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And to him, that's a bad thing.

We're going to get to Jonah in a minute. But what does it say about God? First, it means that God's message of judgment isn't just a bully gloating over a kid he's about to beat up.

Right. When the Lord says in verse two here, call out against Nineveh, he's not issuing the final judgment. Instead, he's issuing a warning to repent. The message yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown isn't just a taunt.

It isn't God preening over a foe that can't fight back. The point of the prophecy wasn't for God to gloat. It was for them to turn, to turn in repentance. And what we see about God is his heart for the nations.

[11:08] And we see that he cares for people, even people we don't like, even the wicked. Right. And we read that throughout the scriptures. Ezekiel chapter 18, the Lord says, have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God.

And not rather that he should turn from his way and live. God's heart is set towards life. He has a heart for the world.

And he expects that his people would too. And that's what we see from the outset. The very first page of the Bible, God told Adam and Eve to go fill the earth.

He cares for the nations. His mindset is global. And then to Abraham, right, the great promise that founds his people Israel. He says to him, Genesis chapter 12, in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

And the book of Jonah is really explicit here. Again, the Lord's heart for the nations, even the wicked ones. Right. We're about to see in chapter one that the pagan sailors are written in a positive light, are going to honor the Lord more than the Lord's prophet.

[12:20] And Nineveh also is written in a remarkably sympathetic light as they heed the Lord's prophecy. And the Lord is glad to see chapter four as he talks about with Jonah, as he's going to talk about it with him.

He's very glad that Nineveh repents. And so God cares for the nations, which, friends, is good news for me because I don't descend from Abraham's lineage.

I am not a recipient of his of the promises to Abraham. But because of God's grace, the apostle Paul tells us in Galatians three that I may become Abraham's heir through faith in Christ, Abraham's great descendant.

And so may the whole world. Because God's heart and God's mission are for every nation and tribe and tongue and people.

And in our cultural moment, that's pretty meaningful, right? Where some would accuse Christianity right now of being, you know, the white man's religion of oppression, God sees it as his free gift of reconciliation to the whole world.

[13:36] Even to the pagan. Even to the one far off. Even to the one unlike us. Even to the wicked. Like Nineveh. Even to you. Even to me.

Now, it's true. Some have abused Christianity to harm and enslave others. But that is just a terrible bastardization of the scriptures, not the scriptures themselves.

And the idea that Christianity is white is very, very new and modern. It is Jewish in its roots, right? We're reading Jonah today. It's multi-ethnic from its founding, the day of Pentecost, as Pastor Mike was just talking about, is culminates in the preaching of the prophet Joel fulfilled on that day, as multitudes of many languages and tongues are brought into the kingdom of God.

And in my opinion, the two most important theologians in the history of the church were Athanasius and Augustine, both of whom were African. And it wasn't until the Muslim conquests of North Africa that Christendom's center of gravity shifted northward from Africa and Asia Minor towards Europe at all.

Now, why do I even mention that? Because, well, think of the group you're most different from, or even most opposed to, whether that's culturally or ideologically, or even if you sinfully harbor racist attitudes against some group.

[15:04] The Lord sent Jonah to Nineveh, a people Jonah would have despised and feared, a people who would soon destroy his home, a people who were astonishing in their violence.

The Lord sent Jonah to spare them. That person, that group that you detest, and right now in our national conversation, people have strong opinions about a lot of things.

And one thing that I'm seeing is that people are tending towards demonizing and hating those on the other side of public discourse.

That person, that group that you detest, the Lord knows their sin better than you do. The Lord is offended by their sin more than you are yours too.

And he offers them mercy in his love. Perhaps the most offensive part of the gospel is that the Lord forgives people that I want, that you want.

[16:19] The Lord offers love to people Jonah hates. He is far more loving than we are.

Does that rub you the wrong way? Well, it certainly rubbed Jonah the wrong way. So his immediate action, verse three, is to run in the opposite direction. Now Nineveh, again, is the Assyrian capital. It's in northern Iraq today. It is northeast of Israel. And Tarshish, there's some discussion about exactly where that was. It's probably in the far western end of the Mediterranean, in the Spain region.

It is essentially the edge of the known world. In the opposite direction. And so what Jonah is doing is defying God's command.

And he is going as far in the opposite direction as he can. And parents, you've probably seen your children do something similar. And let that be a parable to you of our own lives that we do the same.

[17:30] Now, does Jonah think this is actually a good idea? Right? Think with me. Psalm 139 says, where shall I go from your spirit?

Speaking to the Lord. Where shall I flee from your presence? And it's interesting here in chapter one. He doesn't just flee. He flees from the presence of the Lord.

Where shall I flee? Psalm 139 says, from your presence. If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, that is the grave, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea.

Wow, that sounds a lot like what he's doing. Even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me in the light. About me be night. Even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is bright as the day. For darkness is as light with you. Is running from the presence of the Lord a good idea?

[18:38] Do you think that Jonah doesn't know about Psalm 139? Does he not know that he can't hide from God? Right? This is a prophet of the Lord.

Does he not know? Does he think that if God saw what was happening in Nineveh, that he could not see what was happening on the sea and in Tarshish? No.

But our sin, friends, our disobedience to the Lord, it's not rational. It's irrational. Right? Jonah shows in verse 9 that he knows that God is sovereign.

And that God is special. Right? When he says that he serves the Lord, that he fears the Lord, who made the seas and the dry land, these are not actually the normal words for sea and land.

The normal Hebrew word for sea is actually all over this chapter as the tempest is upon it. That's the normal word for body of water. But these words that he uses in verse 9.

[19:44] Sorry about that. Right. So these words in verse 9.

They're reserved for only two contexts. The creation narrative and the exodus crossing. They're in a sense cosmological.

Jonah is pointing beyond water molecules and grains of sand. And he's saying that this storm comes from the God who authored reality.

As you and I might say today, the God who knit together the fabric of the space-time continuum. Jonah, who knows that God authored reality.

Jonah, do you think he sees? Do you think he knows where you are? Do you think you can run from him? And Jonah, how great is the scale of your disobedience if that's the scale of the God you're disobeying?

[20:47] One Jewish writer called this a vain flight and a hopeless rebellion. This is what God means when he so often calls his people a stiff-necked people.

But let's not be so quick to condemn Jonah as if we are somehow superior to him. Because don't we do the same?

Right. Jonah, like Adam, was hiding. Right. Was it foolish? Oh, yes. But don't we know that every form of our disobedience to God is likewise not hidden?

Right. We look at Jonah and we say, don't you know what you're doing isn't good? Don't you know that it's not hidden? But don't you know that it's also not good for the world? For the Lord?

Do you know that it's not good for you? Right. But don't we also know that every form of disobedience to God is not good for us? Not for our own good?

[21:53] We look at Jonah and say, do you think you can outrun God? You fool. But don't we? Right. Our sin, right.

He's fleeing the presence of the Lord as he's disobeying. And don't we do the same? Right. When we sin, we don't just miss the mark abstractly. When we sin, we deny God the lawgiver.

We say, my will be done. And we proudly say to the Lord, right? We stand in defiance of him and say, your way is not as good as mine.

And in so doing, we impede our fellowship with him. Right. How hard is prayer in the instant of sin and in the aftermath of that disobedience?

Right. We are deliberately turning our backs on our Lord. It's like a child who won't look his mother in the eye after he disobeyed. Our sin keeps us from looking to the Lord.

[22:55] It is as if we seek to flee his presence. Just like Jonah. And so is Jonah a fool? Of course. But is he unique?

He's all of us. And so as Jonah was to pay... Oh. He's paying a high price here.

Right. He's about to be thrown into the sea. And so do we. We pay a high price as we disrupt our fellowship with the living God.

Now, what does Jonah do when he's confronted? And by confronted, I mean the storm. The Lord is confronting him through the storm. What does he do when he's confronted? Rather than repent when his flight is hindered, when he is corrected, rather than repent, rather than pray, rather than offer a sacrifice, rather than turn, he gives up and says, you know what?

Throw me overboard. Throw me overboard. Throw me overboard. But luckily, there is a God who pursues us. Right. The picture of the salvation of the Bible is not we found our way to God.

[24:03] It's God initiated and came for us. He called Abraham and gave him promises. He sent Jonah to Nineveh apart from their seeking, apart from them seeking him, in spite of them not seeking him and seeking to take God's people for themselves.

And ultimately, he sent his son. Today, we see a stubborn prophet cast into the abyss for his own sins.

But at the cross, we see our sinless Lord face death for his people's sins. We're going to get to the bottom of this, that you'll understand, next week as we consider his downward trajectory.

But this week, let us continue to the third set of characters. And God is concerned with the sailors, the nations.

And we see that the nations here in the text are being more receptive to God than God's own prophet is. We're going to see that in Nineveh in chapter three.

[25:12] And we're seeing it today in chapter one to the sailors on the ship. They seem to have more respect for the Lord than Jonah does. Right. When when Jonah tells them to throw him overboard in verse 12.

At first, they try something different. They don't want to touch God's prophet if they can help it. They see what the Lord is doing. And they don't want any part of his prophet to harm a hair on his head.

And then when they finally, they have no other recourse, they do cast him overboard. But before they do, they pray. Right. Their concern is for the life of this one man. Contrast that with Jonah. Who doesn't seem to care about mourning every life in the great city of Nineveh. Right. The pagan sailors look a lot better than the man of God does right now. And there's also this cool progression in their fear of the Lord. They're there. It actually focuses on the word fear here.

[26:17] And it shows the relationship with the living God. And what's going on here is that the author of the book of Jonah, perhaps it's Jonah himself, we don't know, is painting them in such a beautiful light.

In such a humble and respectful light. It's a beautiful thing. Verse five. The mariners were afraid. And they each cry out to their own gods. Then.

So they begin with being afraid. Right. Then verse nine. When Jonah tells them that he fears God. The God who made heaven. Who made the sea. The dry land. Then verse 10. They were exceedingly afraid.

And then after the sea ceases its raging. Verse 15. The men feared the Lord exceedingly. And they offered sacrifices to him. And they made vows.

Right. They begin with a fear of the storm. Praying to false gods. Then they begin to fear the Lord. And that fear grew. They were afraid. Then the men were exceedingly afraid.

[27:21] Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly. Right. The most reasonable and faithful people in chapter one are not the prophet or God's people.

The most reasonable faithful people in chapter one are the heathens. And are there not times when proud Christians are shamed by the humility of the world around them?

But luckily. Luckily. We do not serve a God who treats us as we deserve. Jonah wants to treat Nineveh as they deserve. Consigning them to judgment.

The Lord doesn't do that. To those who turn to him in faith. The Lord does not relish the death of the wicked.

But wants to see them come to faith. And so those who are following after false gods in chapter one are brought to a knowledge of the true and living God. And are spared.

[28:20] So too will be Nineveh. And as we begin to draw to the end of chapter one. There's this beautiful passage.

From a Christian writer that I'd like to read you about this. Unlike Jonah. Who is sent to Nineveh. Jesus who is sent to us.

Was not a victim of circumstances like the story. Neither was he simply resigning himself to death. Either as an offender or someone finding yet another way to avoid God's will.

Christ was no runaway. Rather he came to do the will of God the Father. And he always did what pleased him. Further he was conscious of his determined end.

As the savior of the world. Friends. We serve a God. Who sees injustice. And would call the unjust to repentance. And as the heathen sailors showed.

[29:19] But they truly can come to faith in Christ. They can come into a right relationship with God. But Jonah showed that even prominent powerful followers of God.

Perhaps especially prominent ones. Can be hardened against his mercy. Yes. Show mercy to me and mine. But not to those ones over there that I don't like. So isn't it kind that the Lord is going to show this same mercy to Jonah.

Right. He as Jonah is cast into the abyss. We know the fish is going to show up. Right. We know that he is going to rescue Jonah.

Who has given himself up for dead. Which means that next week we're going to trace that downward journey. That vertical journey that he's about to take. We're going to pick up some additional details from chapter one.

I'm very excited to dive in. I didn't mean that as a pun. But we're going to dive in to chapter two. And see his descent. And see what he finds there.

[30:27] I am so excited to jump into that with you. It is going to be a beautiful picture of the gospel. And a beautiful testimony for this moment for you.

And so I hope that as we walk into this book of Jonah together. That you do so with me with a great expectation. The Lord is going to show us the beauty of the gospel. So let's pray together.
Lord our God. I thank you that you show us today. Your care. For the whole world. Not just the ones that we like.

But Lord that you offer forgiveness even to those whom we will not forgive. Those who we do not love. So Lord I pray that you would change our hearts.

Please don't let us be Jonah. Lord will you soften my heart. And all of our hearts. To love those whom we find unlovable.

[31:29] As we see that you love them. And have given your son for them.

Lord thank you that the abyss is not the end of the story. For Jonah.

Or for us. But that you. Rescue. And redeem. Amen. I pray that in the name of Jesus Christ. Our Savior. Amen.