

God's Worst Missionary

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 0 0] So tonight we start a short series in Jonah, four weeks, chapter a week. This is an amazing book, Jonah. I suspect people think it's a bit of a kid's story because it's got a fish and it's massive and it swallows a guy and that's kind of cool.

But it's actually a very sophisticated piece of writing filled with cutting satire and humor. So we'll be spending four weeks in this.

And I hope by the end of it you'll realize the hero of the book is not the whale. It's not Jonah. It's actually the focus of the book. Well, actually, I hope you see it's the unrelenting compassion of God, a God who pursues us.

So here's what we're going to do today. We're going to look at chapter one, kind of break it up into scenes and see how God's sovereignty and God's compassion plays out.

So scene one, let's call it the core. So first of all, you should know that Jonah is an Old Testament prophet. And this book is part of the sort of the minor prophets in the Old Testament. But it doesn't really read like an Old Testament prophet, does it?

[1 : 1 3] I mean, because the prophetic books back in the days, they kind of have a bit of a standard pattern. God gives a message to a prophet. Then God tells the prophet who they are to relay the message to.

And the rest of the book is usually about the messenger doing exactly that. It's a good system. That's good, right? It works. So what happens to Jonah is something of a shock. Instead of doing what prophets normally do, what we have here is the story of a prophet who ran.

So in scene one, God speaks to Jonah and he says, arise. It's a good word there. Come back to that. Arise, go to Nineveh and call out against them. So Nineveh is this ancient capital of the Syrian empire.

It wasn't just any sort of old city, though. This city was very important. They were the enemies of God's people. They represented evil incarnate.

Today it would be like telling missionaries to go to ISIS, to an ISIS stronghold, to preach to the soldiers who have crucified Christians and beheaded children. It would be something like that.

[2 : 1 3] So this is what God calls Jonah to do. And Jonah didn't want anything to do with it. It doesn't say why in this chapter, but later on we find out it's because he knows God wants to forgive them.

Jonah knows that God wants to extend grace to the Ninevites, and he doesn't want to be any part of that. Jonah was a deeply ethnocentric kind of guy, and that really affected his idea of grace.

I'll come back to that idea as well. Okay, so scene one, the call. Scene two, the fugitive prophet. So Jonah, he tries to run away.

I mean, it's all a bit, a puny rebellion really. He buys a ticket to a place called Tarsus, and geography is helpful here, to show the degree to which that he dislikes the idea of God forgiving the Assyrians.

So Nineveh is as far east as you could go in the ancient Near East. And Tarsus, Jonah's destination that he bought a ticket for, is probably as far west as you can go.

[3 : 13] So it's the city at the tip of Spain, beyond which is the Atlantic Ocean, and you don't want to go past there, out in the Atlantic Ocean. So Tarsus was the opposite end of the world as far as he knew.

I want you to notice too this detail. That God spoke to Jonah. He said, arise. Remember that? He says, arise, go to Tarsus. Which literally means up, up, go to Tarsus.

And what does Jonah do? The passage says he goes down to Joppa. And once he's in a boat, he goes down into it in verse 3. So the runaway prophet gets a call from God. And what does he do?

He goes west instead of east. He goes down instead of up. And how does Jonah respond to all this? How has God respond to all this? It's great.

Verse 4. That word hurled, you remember in Samuel when Saul hurls a spear at David the Triuncule?

[4 : 16] It was the same word, hurled. God just throws the storm at the ship. And there's this great line, so the ship threatened to break up. I'm going to break up. So God's response is a storm.

See, God will not let Jonah's ridiculous kind of puny attempt at rebellion get in the way of his great desire to forgive and extend grace to these Assyrians.

And it was a puny attempt. And the passage is trying to show us this. Jonah's just hiding in the bottom of the boat, and God hurls a storm at it. I mean, God could have let Jonah go, I guess.

But our God pursues us. Even when we act like children, God pursues us. That's one of the things the passage really tries to get across is just how ridiculous Jonah is.

And one of the main ways it does that, it's by comparing him very unfavorably to the pagan sailors. So the ship's got all these sailors on it, right? And in this scene, the sailors come out looking actually really good compared to the prophet.

[5 : 22] So the storm's raging on. We'll talk about that a bit. So the storm's raging on. Where's Jonah? He's asleep at the bottom most part of the ship. I mean, he's doing everything he can to ignore God. In fact, he's sleeping, which is like the highest form of denial.

It's like just completely checking out. But God breaks through. And how does God break through? How does God speak to him? Through these sailors. The captain comes down, wakes him up. And what does the captain say?

Very interestingly, he says, arise. Arise. Same thing that God said to Jonah at the start. And then the captain tells Jonah to pray.

So these salty old mariners here are more aware of the value of prayer than the prophet Jonah is. And then they cast dice to work out why this is all happening, which is a common ancient practice.

And God makes sure that the dice point to Jonah. And they start asking Jonah these questions. Who are you? What do you do? Where are you from? See, these guys, these sailors, they're taking this very seriously.

[6 : 21] They know someone has done something wrong. And they're thinking maybe one of us is a sorcerer here on the boat. Maybe somebody's done something really awful.

Something displeasing to God. Finally, Jonah says who he is. Verse 9. I'm a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

This is actually the theological center of the passage. We've talked about chiasms before. That's kind of like an old literary structure where you envelope an idea with repeated patterns.

And the middle verse of the first chapter is this line here. It's the center verse. I am a Hebrew. I don't know what you think about that. But in the context of what's going on, the words have a very cold feel about them.

It's in my mind. I don't think Jonah's all of a sudden got on board with God's plan. There's a bit of background here to Jonah. From two kings, we know that Jonah was a prophet of the royal court.

[7 : 25] He was very Israeli-centric. He wasn't interested in God coming to other nations. Kind of like church folk that don't want to change to reach out to the neighborhood.

That kind of example of that. So to their questions, to the storm, Jonah responds, I think, with just great arrogance. I'm a Hebrew. And they say, what have you done?

It's a great line, isn't it? What have you done? The mariners, these sailors, they realize the big problem here. They got it, and Jonah didn't again.

Jonah was the man who was defying his own God. And they realized this was a bigger problem than he realized it was. It's such a wonderfully clever book, isn't it? I mean, the hypocrisy of Jonah couldn't be more obvious.

I mean, with just one second of self-reflection, Jonah should have worked this out, but he didn't. I mean, he's too caught up in his ethnicity and his chosenness and thinking he's so much better than these guys.

[8 : 29] But it's the sailors who are shown to be far more pious than he is. It's awfully embarrassing when non-believers are more devout than Christians, isn't it?

I don't know if you've had that experience. Scene three. So Jonah says, well, throw me into the sea then. And I don't think he's repented. I think he just probably wants to die rather than preach to the Assyrians.

Interestingly, the sailors don't want to kill him. But they pray to Jonah's God in verse 14, in obedience, and chuck him overboard, and the storm abates. And then there's this wonderful verse 16 here.

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly. They offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. So these guys, they come to faith. They come to faith in God.

It's remarkable. I love these sailors. I think they're brilliant. There's kind of random characters in the story, but they serve a couple of very important purposes. One, they are people that God loves.

[9 : 34] God loves these sailors. And so he folds them into the plan for Jonah and saves them. And why does God do that? Because he's a compassionate God. He's a God who pursues. And two, I think the second purpose of these sailors is they show up Jonah.

They do what Jonah should have been doing. They pray. They call out. They act in obedience. They make Jonah look ridiculous. They're a model for how Jonah should have operated in life, but didn't.

And why does the passage make Jonah look so ridiculous? I mean, I think it's...

One of the reasons is it's to expose his hypocrisy and in turn shine a light on our hypocrisy. Jonah thinks he is better than these pagans, the Ninevites, and the sailors.

He thinks he can hide from God. He thinks he can do lip service to a creed and then do whatever he wants. He denies the gospel to these sailors. I mean, the list could go on and on.

[10 : 38] I think the other reason that we're trying to make Jonah look ridiculous is to show the greatness of God in this story. Because despite Jonah's betrayal, despite his obstinance, despite him acting like this petulant child, God loves Jonah.

God wants Jonah. Which is why when he's thrown overboard, God sends his giant fish to rescue him. On a quick side note, for some people, I think some people find the fish part of the story a little bit far-fetched.

Perhaps think Jonah is a parable. But if we confess that God made the heavens and the earth and Jesus rode from the dead, I think the fish miracle is fairly minor on that scale.

Yeah. And also Matthew 12, Jesus talks about Jonah as a historical figure and that's actually happening. So we'll go with it. Actually happened, I think.

Back to the passage. I'm finishing up. So the chapter is about the hypocrisy of Jonah, which points to the unrelenting goodness of God to people who don't deserve it, like us.

[11 : 51] Let me finish by what Jesus says, as I just mentioned, about this story. In Matthew, he says this, Then some scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.

But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

So Jesus draws a parallel with Jonah here in terms of his death.

Christ's death, of course, being the ultimate, the supreme example of God's unrelenting pursuit of us.

So then, I have two sentences of application for you this evening, folks. Let's be more like the sailors, less like Jonah, but mostly, let's be people who trust in the compassion of God when we are inevitably more like Jonah than we should be.

[13 : 15] Amen.