

Story Of Jonah

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're looking at Jonah again, and I'm told to ask you whether you can hear me or not.

You can hear me. All right. Now, I didn't sleep nearly as well as Jonah did.

But the great blessing of Sunday morning is that after you finish preaching, you can go away and go to sleep, and it all passes.

But when you've got to meet the same people the next morning, it makes it a lot harder. And so I spent the night wondering about how to tell you what I said last night so that you would understand it.

Not very many people spoke to me after last night, so I took that to be an indication that while they were very sympathetic, they... So I want to explain one or two things just to start with.

[1 : 0 8] In this business of the violent alternative, I suggested that God says go and we say no. I think it is really very important that we recognize that.

And it's because, as Isaiah puts it so well, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your thoughts, my thoughts than yours.

That God is just operating on a totally different level with a totally different understanding of who we are. And we're living in a very sort of relatively small little world in which we don't want God to interfere too much with us because the sort of dimensions of our world just don't fit with the dimensions of his purpose.

So that it's deeply within us that we say no when God says go. I mean, we fail to recognize, I think, the very powerful...

Which God does recognize, the very powerful dynamic of our own self-centeredness. I mean, our self-centeredness is a necessary thing that's given to us in order that we should survive, that we don't just dissolve in a blob.

[2 : 3 7] But it also means that we are very much ourselves over against God, and we begin to think in terms of ourselves.

It's like, you know, the hardest part of the AA program is, I mean, presumably is step number one. And step number one is something about being powerless to help yourself.

You know, that you realize that the world you have and the issue you have to deal with is bigger than anything, any resource within the world of which you are in control.

And if you're in control, then you're done. So you have to turn over control to someone else. In other words, your no is a lot smaller than God's go.

And ultimately, God's go has to triumph. That's what I was trying to explain to you last night. It's also, and I was very struck two or three Sundays ago, when those three lessons came together, and I mentioned them to you then, where Isaiah says, I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, where mine eyes have seen the Lord.

[3 : 55] You know, and you see the sort of transcendent reality of who God is and his purpose for our life. And then you look at yourself, and you realize that you are very small.

And you would be of no significance at all unless God chose to confer significance on you, which is what he's done. And so your significance really derives from who he is, not from who you are.

And that's hard to come to, I think. And Peter, you know, when he was asked to throw down his nets for a draft of fish, and they contained more than he could pull in, and the nets were in danger of breaking.

And Peter's spontaneous reaction was, depart from me, for I am a sinful man. My world's too small. Oh, you know, and your purposes are too big.

And that consciousness is a very necessary place to come to, because we live in a world where our world is, in our minds at least, too big, and God is too insignificant to pay much attention to, or to give serious attention to in our lives.

[5 : 06] And that whole thing has got to be reversed. And that's why, you know, it's so radical a thing that I suggested that our God's great word to us, from the center of who he is, is to go, and our great word to him is no.

Oh, well, most people suspect that you can discover God by a kind of, you know, readjusting your course slightly, you know, that you're going this direction and you need to go this direction.

And if you just make a few changes, which you haven't got time to make this week, but probably next week or next summer, or when you get opportunity, you will change slightly, and then your life will be entirely in order with what God wants.

In the meantime, you're not far off the course now. And any time you really wanted to, you could make the necessary adjustment, you know. And that it's just a matter of doing something like that.

And most people waste most of their lives thinking that's what the case is, you know. And then they're all full of hurt feelings when they find out that repentance means you turn right around and go the other way.

[6 : 20] And so that's why I think it's very important. I gave a talk at the cathedral on Wednesday, and somebody came up to me afterwards and said, that's a very bleak picture you paint.

And I tried quickly to apologize and fill in a little rose colors around the edges of what I'd said. But when I got home, you know, I was helped to realize, yes, it's a very bleak picture, you know, where we are in relationship to God's purpose for our lives.

So go and know I'm going to stand by, because that's God speaking to us and us speaking to God, and that's where it comes. Nineveh. Now, I suggested to you that Nineveh is the place you don't want to go.

Now, I think that's a misconception, because if that was in fact your Nineveh, then all you'd have to do to be a Christian is to do what you don't like doing.

And that's what most people think being a Christian is anyway. And Nineveh is not the place you don't want to go.

[7 : 40] It's more the place you'd never dream of going, you know. I mean, it's just so far beyond anything that would even be conceivable to you.

Anything that you ever thought you had the potential for or the capacity for or God could use you in that situation, a place where you would never dream of going is the place to which God is sending you.

And so you've got to somehow be open to that possibility. That's, I think, an adjustment on Nineveh that I wanted to make. The next thing I want to talk about is what I'm going to call storm religion.

And this is a very popular form of religion that most of us, if not all of us, are very familiar with.

I can illustrate it easily like this. That's it, you see.

[8 : 55] There you are in the boat. And a lot of people, you know, they've learned most of what they've learned about religion in that situation.

You know, when the storm comes, you'll see it. If you read about it here, it's fairly clear. The Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.

And the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his God, and they threw their wares over into the sea to lighten the ship.

That was the storm. And in this situation, these mariners are going to learn a whole lot about God. I don't like the word religion particularly, but I was given, I think, a great insight into our religion the other night when we went to see the Rain Man.

The thing that occurred to me about that, as I've been thinking about it, is that Dustin Hoffman is autistic in this particular portrayal, and that what we are with relationship to God is autistic.

[10 : 33] That is, we're so turned in upon ourselves that we can't turn out and relate to God. You know, that God is so big and his purpose is so much beyond us that we just keep turning in upon ourselves and in upon ourselves and in upon ourselves and maybe get to the point where we can't get beyond ourselves, we can't relate.

Now, the way, in the portrayal, the way that Dustin Hoffman was made to live was that he had certain rituals that he went through, you know, that had to do with certain TV programs or writing down things in his book or doing, I don't want to give the movie away or anything, but that was the way he coped with being autistic.

He had to learn certain rituals that made life possible for him, even in an institution. And we have to learn certain rituals, too, in our personal lives in order to cope with the overwhelming reality of God.

And if we don't, the result is that we just become incommunicado. We're just out of touch with the whole reality of the world around us and the God of that world and the God of our lives.

So that in order, we have to develop these rituals to keep us in touch with a far greater reality that we can't know by ourselves.

[12 : 06] And so we go in for things like going to church and having quiet times and reading your Bible and tithing. And in this, we encounter the reality of God.

And, you know, the disappointment of... I've wrecked this movie for everybody now, and I hate... I'm presuming most of you have seen it anyway, so we'll work on that basis.

But the disappointing thing about the movie is that this man goes back to the institution because he simply can't cope with the outside world.

It's impossible for him to do it. And so he goes back. Even though he has a wonderful adventure outside the institution, he ultimately has to go back. I think our sort of spiritual autism is ultimately that we can cope with the overwhelming reality of God and his purpose and that we come to the place where, by his grace at work in us, that's what happens.

Now, that, I think, is what storm religion is.

[13 : 30] In a sense, it's a series of rituals that are built into our culture and into our society that help us to cope with the storms that overwhelm us and threaten to do us in, that we learn certain rituals by which we can deal with it.

So, verse 5 of chapter 1 says that they were afraid. And then it goes on that each one cried to his God. And all of us know that that's part of the pattern of our cultural religion.

When fear becomes overwhelming, we cry to our God. Then we try and make some kind of sacrifice by throwing things into the sea, thinking that that's how we can appease God and improve our situation.

And the captain of the ship, who was presumably captain because he was a skilled seaman, nevertheless gave up captaining the ship and, depending on his ability to see this ship through the storm, and he went through the ship commanding that people cry out to their God because he knew he could no longer cope with the situation that had developed.

There's a story about a farmer who sold a horse. And he told the fellow that this horse is the best trained, most obedient horse that you will have ever met in all your life.

[15 : 06] And the fellow was so impressed with the sales pitch that he bought the horse. Now, you've all heard this joke, I'm sure, because I've heard it millions of times and I'm fed up with it. But it serves the purpose.

The guy who bought the horse harnessed it up and said, Giddy up, and the horse didn't move.

And he tried everything he knew how to do. And he couldn't get the horse to move or do anything. So he finally, in disgust, went back to the fellow who sold it.

He said, That horse isn't worth anything. It won't do anything, you're told. It's told. So the fellow who had sold it to him went to the horse, picked up a two-by-four, and gave it an awful belt over the backside.

And then the horse did everything it was told. He says, You've just got to get its attention first. Now, you really have heard that one before. Well, anyway, that's what God has to do to us.

[16 : 14] And I think it happens all the time. Getting the attention of spiritually autistic, self-centered, self-concerned people, as we are and as we're trained to be, and as our culture demands that we should be, to get our attention, to come in touch with a greater reality of the purposes of God, is something that is hard to do.

And that's why it's interesting to observe how God got the attention of these mariners, and everybody was crying to his God, whatever that God might be, and that it was based on God, in a sense, turning up the fear until it was first they feared greatly, and then they feared exceedingly, and then they feared even more.

And in a sense, the pitch of fear got turned up and up and up until they recognized that they were totally beyond any capacity to deal with the storm that had overtaken them.

And in crying out to their God, they resorted to one famous form of contemporary religion. They had a lottery. And they decided that this was how you could get to know the will of God.

And that fundamentally, just by the way, is what's wrong with lotteries. The danger is that if you win a million dollars, you might think that you deserved it.

[18 : 02] And that's what would do the damage, you know, and then a million dollars would do further damage. But the fundamental damage is thinking that somehow you deserve to win, and that would be a mistaken impression.

However, God seems to have used this lottery in order to identify this man, and the man it identified was Jonah. And Jonah was hauled, in a sense, before the crew, and they said, Who are you? Where are you from?

It was sort of like he went to the coffee party at St. John's after church. And God asked the usual coffee party questions. And he said to them, I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

Now they were in the midst of the sea, and the sea was very impressive. And when they met a man who feared the Lord, and the Lord was the God of heaven who made the sea, then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, What is this that you have done?

For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he told them. Now, that was Jonah giving his testimony, as it were.

[19 : 23] He was telling them where he came from, who he was, and what he was doing. He was simply stating where he was at. And they recognized that where he was at was a very frightening place to be.

And they didn't know what to do, and they said to Jonah, What will we do with you that the sea may quiet down for us? And Jonah said, You're going to have to throw me overboard.

And so they decided they couldn't do that, and the men rode hard to bring the ship back to land. And the sea grew more and more tempestuous.

And you see that wonderful sort of evidence of we will try absolutely everything so that we don't have to depend on God.

If we can in some way develop such strength or skill or somehow fight the battle by ourselves. And they persisted in doing it.

[20 : 29] Even though all that happened as a result was that their fear became greater and greater. And then they had to face a terrible reality.

And the terrible reality was that they had to throw Jonah overboard. It's necessary, it seems, that somebody should die.

And it was them or him. And they chose him, understandably. And Jonah was in such a condition of despair and obstinacy.

He had sought to escape the presence of the Lord. He wasn't, as he sought, able to escape the presence of the Lord.

There was no use of him surviving. And so he had resigned himself to death. And they took it upon themselves to throw him into the sea.

[21 : 31] And he prayed, and he prayed, and he prayed. But before they did, they prayed that if this man was for any reason innocent, and they had misunderstood who he was, that they weren't going to add to their misfortune by having his blood on their hands.

And so they prayed to the Lord. Now, not very far before, each was praying to his God. So something significant has happened in the interval, that they have become very impressed with the testimony of Jonah.

And they figure they have come up against the reality of who God is, the Lord who made the seas and the dry land, the Lord who was the Lord of heaven.

And so you can see in one sense that these people have been converted, and now they are praying to the Lord. And they are praying that what they are doing, which they have to do, or which they feel they have to do, will not compound their difficulties, as they thought they might.

So then they threw Jonah into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging, and the storm was still. Now, you can imagine what would happen from that point on in history as these men returned and told this amazing story of how they had thrown a man into the sea, and the storm was still.

[23 : 10] You see, the thing that I think we have real difficulty coming up against is that there is a great deal more to our lives than we can account for.

there is something going on, and there was something going on between the Lord and Jonah, and it was affecting all these people.

Now, it's almost... I'd like just to get you to remember this, that there's something going on between the Lord and the church, and it affects all the people, the people who are totally unconcerned about religion.

It affects the whole of our society. Jonah knew what was going on, and he knew what the Lord was doing, and he knew what had to happen to him in order to do that, because he was deliberately disobedient to the Lord.

And he knew that, and he was seeking to escape from the presence of the Lord. And the church as an institution, I think, has tremendous pressure on it to try and escape from the presence of the Lord, to try and get away from the demands that God makes on us as a community.

[24 : 39] We can be more worldly, more sophisticated, more understanding, more rational. We can be all the things that make us as a community more attractive, but we cease to know the meaning of our existence.

And we come to a point of depression and despair and discouragement and say, what's the use? Because the only reason for which we exist is to live in response to the word of the Lord.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, and Jonah sought to go out from the presence of the Lord. And the word of the Lord comes to us and comes to the church, and we have no other *raison d'être*, no other reason for being than to hear and respond to the word of God.

And when we decide not to do that, our function becomes meaningless. We have no other function than to hear and respond to the word of God as he has spoken it to us in Jesus Christ.

You see, the amazing part about this story, and this story is thought to come from the 8th century B.C., that this story is almost 3,000 years old, is that this story was preserved century after century after century, even though the sole intent of this story was to point to the people of Israel and say to them, you have been given a mission from the Lord, you have been given the word of the Lord, and your business is to live in obedience to it, and you're not doing it.

[26 : 32] Because Jonah was illustrating the unwillingness of the people of Israel to do the thing for which God had elected them and called them, had chosen them to do it.

And they said, no, we're not going to do that. And so this is a total indictment of the very people who preserved this scripture century after century as an indictment against themselves.

And it's why the church must preserve this scripture as an indictment against ourselves, that we have a fairly well-defined function, and that is to hear the word of the Lord and do it.

And that's all. And when the Lord says, go, our business is to do it. And not to escape from doing it.

Not to find some more congenial or sophisticated way of doing it, but to do it. And this, of course, comes right down to us as individuals.

[27 : 39] That the reason for our lives is to live in obedience to the Lord who has spoken to us by His word.

And to bring ourselves corporately and individually to the place where we can hear and respond to that word. There's a little quotation here I'd like to read to you.

You know that Northrop Fry, who's the great English professor and the writer of the book on the Bible called The Great Code.

He talked about Nineveh. And he talked about Nineveh was the greatest city of the ancient world. It was a three days journey to cross it.

An impressive tribute to the size of Nineveh, at least to the size of the stories that remain about Nineveh. Yet it quite suddenly disappeared under the sands where it remained until the mid-nineteenth century so that through the most of the history since this book was written, nobody has even known where Nineveh was until it was found last century.

[29 : 06] In contrast to that, Northrop Fry says, the Jews didn't build a city. They wrote a book. And that book has formed and shaped countless cultures and peoples ever since that time and is still the most powerful book in the world because of its unique testimony testimony to the God whom Jonah describes as the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

This book tells who he is. And so you see, what you end up with in this story of Jonah, the place you end up is that they recognized, Jonah recognized, that there was no use trying to go on, to seek someplace where he was free of the presence of the Lord.

And so the sailors threw Jonah into the sea, the sea ceased from its raging, the storm was still. And the amazing result of this storm experience, and you can see this at the end of chapter one, it says, the sea ceased from its raging, the men feared the Lord exceedingly.

So their exceeding fear of the storm was now transferred. The storm was passed and they now feared the Lord of the storm, the God who had created the storm.

And of course, most people live with misplaced fear. They're afraid of the wrong thing. They need to be afraid of God and not afraid of the storm.

[31 : 13] And that should be the position of a Christian. He's not one who's afraid of anything the world can do to him. But he does with awe and reverence fear the Lord.

And so these men feared exceedingly. They offered sacrifices to the Lord and made vows. And so you see how you develop the rituals of religion, making sacrifices, making vows, doing these things, trying to respond appropriately to the God whom they barely knew.

And that's what human religion, I think, is all about in all its forms, is some kind of appropriate human response to a God whom we don't know.

But it's in amazing contrast, if I might suggest it, to the God who has spoken to us, whose word has come to us.

Storms will come and go in our lives. And many of you may be in the midst of some kind of personal storm right now, the consequences of which you may fear a great deal.

[32 : 36] But it's entirely inappropriate that you should fear that storm to the exclusion of the God of that storm, in whom all the circumstances of it are to be found.

The reality of what it's all about is to be found in him. And that's why, you see, as Christians, we are not people who are trying by religious ritual to weather the storm.

That's very primitive kind of religion. Once you come to the New Testament, you can, what is it you do to do up a storm?

You can, you know that. No, no, no. This guy can something up a storm. All right, you think it's whipped, do you?

Well, anyway, you get people who can whip up a storm in a hurry, but stir up a storm, we've decided.

[33 : 56] The official word has come down. foment, that we're getting better. Anyway, the function of our lives as a congregation is not to foment, stir up, whip up a storm every Sunday morning, or from time to time, or go around looking for storms, because we're not to live in response to storms that sweep through our lives all the time.

We are to live in response to the word of the Lord. That's how we're to live our lives, in response to that word. In other words, you can whip up your own private storm simply by opening the scriptures and reading it.

And you move to the God of the storm, the God who has spoken a word to us, like the word of the Lord came to Jonah.

Well, that's more than half my time is gone, and I'm not through chapter one yet. Anyway, here we are. Here's what it says.

The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

[35 : 32] Well, we've talked to you a little bit about this, that the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And a lot of people have trouble with Jonah being swallowed by a fish. fish. But it's very important that you understand what happened, because the whole of chapter two is written from the belly of the whale.

And it's there that Jonah learned to pray in a new way, and it's there that Jonah learned that prayer is ultimately the reality by which we live.

I want just to suggest that to you, so to take two minutes really, I guess, to tell you a little bit about chapter two, because I want you to have that when you go into your discussion groups.

first. If you, it doesn't work. Here, this is the situation.

[36 : 55] This is the sea. This is the ship. Here, this is Jonah on the way down, and he's just left the ship.

And here, with his mouth wide open, is the fish. fish. And, one of the great pictures of scripture is that the sea is like death.

It reaches up, and you, and swallows you up, and you disappear out of sight, and you're gone, never to be seen again. that's the sea.

So, it's a picture of death. That's how death takes place. It's not just that water out there. It's a symbol of death. Having gone into the sea, then Jonah has experienced death.

And then, being swallowed by the whale, and finding some accommodation right about there. Jonah has gone to death and to hell.

[38 : 29] And he comes back in chapter two and speaks to us from the dead. He is finished. Now, most of us, I mean, we spend a lot of time wondering what it's like to be dead.

And chapter two will tell you exactly what it's like to be dead. Because there is no hope. There is no future. There is nothing. But there is a consciousness of being dead and gone to hell.

Hell in the sense of the place of departed spirits. And probably one of the greatest fears of the twentieth century is that when death comes, that there will be a continuing consciousness.

And we in the twentieth century have a strong faith that when it comes, it will be over. And you won't have to think ever again. Nothing, nothing will happen.

But what the story of Jonah tells you is that there is a consciousness after death, even though you are in the place of the dead.

[39 : 46] And that's where Jonah comes to. And if you look at it, it's there that Jonah learned to pray, you know, and in a way that he had never prayed before.

Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God, from the belly of the fish. and look at verse two. I called to the Lord out of my distress, and this is the ultimate distress, the ultimate agony, that focus of fear which besets us all from time to time, death itself.

From death, the ultimate distress, Jonah calls out to the Lord. Lord, and he answered me, out of the belly of hell I cried, and the Lord heard my voice.

He says, thou didst cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood was round about me. So this sort of conscious experience of the end, and the waves and thy billows passed over me, and I said, I am cast out from thy presence.

Isn't that a poignant moment? Jonah set out to depart from the presence of the Lord, and he's now arrived at his destination, the place he set out for.

[41 : 24] I am cast out from thy presence. God allows you to have your will, and his will.

And where Jonah set out for, Jonah arrived. And that's why you journeying types, where you're setting out for is where you're going to arrive.

And what the Lord's going to do about that, I don't know. but it's very significant that it says that. And there Jonah says, how shall I again look upon thy holy temple?

You know, that longing was still there, a longing which he related to worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem. That was the place where, at the end, all his life focused and said, that was the moment in relationship to your people and to you in the temple, that was where it was.

And how shall I again look upon your holy temple? The waters closed in over me, the deep was around about me, weeds were wrapped about my head.

[42 : 48] At the roots of the mountains, I went down to the land whose bars closed over me forever. Well, that is the conscious experience of death.

And, you know, we don't know very much about it, but as a kind of unique prophetic mission, Jonah was sent on this journey in order to tell us about it.

There's only one thing more I want to tell you, and that's this. The waters closed over me, weeds about my head, I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.

Yet thou didst bring up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God. Now, that is a pivotal verse, out of which I think you can begin to understand something which we don't understand apart from God showing it to us.

We understand it when we sing at Easter, death's mightiest powers have done their worst. They have done all they can do.

[44 : 18] And you learn from Jonah that the power of death is limited. Death limited, you might say. It is limited in that it can do no more.

And Jacques Elot, in his commentary on Jonah, says that this, that he points out that there are two tenses in Hebrew. One is perfect and the other is imperfect.

death is described in terms of the perfect tense, that is, that it's done all that it can do. But God's activity is given in the imperfect tense, and that is that he hasn't begun to do all that he can do.

His perfect will is still imperfect, because he still has a great deal more to do. And that's what this story is about, about how much more God has to do, and that death can only do so much.

You know, now, in our society, in our culture, we think that death has the last word. but Jonah teaches us that death can only do so much, and even from the pit, our life can be brought up.

[45 : 53] And Jonah describes this. When my soul fainted within me, I remember the Lord, my prayer came to thee, into thy holy temple, you know, that he was transported by prayer into the temple, the place where he longed to be.

Those who pay regard, those who pay regard to vain idols, you know, he was just bursting with the reality of the artificiality of religion and how much people spend paying regard to vain and empty idols.

angels and they don't know, it's hard for me to love.