

Jonah

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[0:00] If you could keep the Jonah passage open in front of you, that would be fantastic. Let me add my Happy New Year to those who I haven't had the chance to see in the last five or six days or whatever it's been.

Hopefully you have started well and hopefully this year will be a year in which you grow in your love of God and your knowledge of Him. And we're going to try and do that together tonight by beginning a series in Jonah.

And I did challenge you last week, I understand if you forgot, but I did challenge you that we're actually going to look at Jonah, kind of all of it, every week. So even though we read Jonah 1 just then and we're going to read Jonah 3 next week and Jonah 4 the week after, we're going to look at all of it.

So it would be a good idea to at some point in the next three weeks sit down and have a crack at reading all of Jonah. It's not a big ask and it will bless you as we work our way through the passage. I'm going to pray and then we will start having a look at what it is God wants to teach us from this. Father God, we thank you for the chance to gather this evening.

[1:01] We thank you for your word and the power that it has to shape us and to change us. And we ask that tonight as we sit and as we reflect on the story of Jonah, that you would give us a bigger vision of you, that the result of tonight would not be that we know more things, but that we are different people.

We ask that your spirit would make us more and more like Jesus so that you get the glory. Amen. Amen. When you truly believe something, it has to actually affect the way that you live or your actions.

It's not enough to just say, I believe something. You can always tell when the rubber hits the road whether or not this is something you have a genuine conviction about. I remember it's nearly 10 years ago now, for my 21st birthday, I was given a round the world ticket.

And I was sitting on the plane struggling to sleep. And one of the movies that I decided to watch in that plane was a movie called Super Size Me. I don't know if you remember this movie, but the basic premise is a guy called Morgan Spurlock, cracker of a name, decided that it would be a good idea for a month to eat only McDonald's, breakfast, lunch and dinner.

And the rules were, whenever a McDonald's employee suggested that he upsize his meal or would he like fries or he had to say yes. And he had to eat all of whatever came to him over the course of the month.

[2:19] And so, you know, obviously there were people around him, his girlfriend, his friends that were concerned about what might happen over the course of this experiment. And the experiment went roughly like you would expect.

There's lots of him vomiting in it. By the end of the month, he's fatter. He's got a worse heart. Everything's going bad for him. And you can watch a movie like that. And even I can watch a movie like that and say, McDonald's is bad for you.

McDonald's is going to do you damage. But for some reason, the first thing I did when I got off that plane was go get a Big Mac. I'd spent 45 minutes watching him eat and throw up and eat and throw up.

But all it did was make me want to eat McDonald's. And so I could articulate that I believe McDonald's was bad. But what I was doing actually betrayed that I believed something different. I believed that this guy was an idiot and it wouldn't happen to me.

When you truly believe something, it changes your actions. It changes what you do as well. And so what about some of the things that we believe as Christians, as followers of God?

[3 : 21] We believe that God is sovereign. We believe that God is in control. The Bible says it. We claim it. We encourage one another with it.

But do we live like God is in control? Would people look at our lifestyle and the decisions we make and the priorities we have and would they conclude from us that we believe God is in control?

When you hear about things like the earthquake in Haiti or the various tsunamis that have happened, the global financial crisis, children dying of starvation, can you still, when you hear that, say with confidence, God is in control?

Or do you feel a little bit embarrassed when your neighbours ask you, where's your God in that? When your school friends or maybe even your family ask you, where's your God with all this stuff going on, can you still confidently say he's in control?

Or do you start to feel a bit apologetic? What about in your own life? When difficult times come, do you feel like God is losing his grip? As you wrestle with the stress of paying bills, as you deal with the death of someone close to you, as you wrestle with the loneliness of being the only single person when all your friends have husbands or wives or boyfriends or girlfriends, in those moments, do you still act like God is in control?

[4 : 37] Or do you start to wonder whether or not he's actually powerful enough to be in control of everything that's happening in the world? Or what about in the good times?

You get a promotion, you get a pay rise, you celebrate the birth of a child, an anniversary, you're feeling healthy, you're secure financially. At that point, do you stop and thank God for what he's given you?

Or do you reflect on how hard you've worked and how wise you've been with your finances and how much exercise you've done and how you've looked after yourself health-wise? Yeah, we believe God is in control, we say it, but what about our actions?

Do our lives actually speak that we believe that truth? Or is it just a trite theory that we throw out there occasionally because that's what we're supposed to believe as Christians? If there is a difference between what we say we believe and how we're living, then we need to ask God to show us what is really true.

And we need to ask him to show it to us in such a way that our life matches up with what we claim to believe so that our words and our actions become one.

[5 : 43] And so tonight, maybe for you, you need to humbly come before God and ask him to shape how you live in light of the truth that he wants to show you tonight. I want to ask two questions as we wrestle with Jonah.

Basically, can God and will God? Open up to Jonah chapter 1. Is God really in control?

Jonah is a man in a privileged position when it comes to God. So, bit of background, Jonah's a prophet, which means God speaks to Jonah and then, like, personally speaks to Jonah and then Jonah goes and passes that message on to other people.

So, out of all the people, you would expect Jonah to have a level of confidence in God's sovereignty and power more than anyone else. He's got the direct line to God who created everything.

He knows stuff. Jonah would speak to God's people. He knows that God is in control and he believes it. It's part of being a Hebrew. He would have memorized the Scriptures. He would have learned big chunks of the Old Testament so that he could have confidently quoted Scripture to you.

[6 : 47] But does his life actually match his so-called belief in God's control and God's sovereignty? Look at verse 1 with me. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai.

Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me. But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa where he found a ship bound for that port.

After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. Jonah knows that God is in control.

That would have been one of the messages that he was told to keep proclaiming to the people and yet, given a specific instruction from God, he thinks he can run away.

God sends him on a very specific mission. There's no possibility that he just got the city wrong and accidentally went in the wrong direction. God says, go to this city with this message and Jonah says, actually, no, I don't want to do that and I'm going to run away.

[7 : 48] It's kind of ridiculous. God, who created the whole earth, has given Jonah a job and he thinks by going to a city other than the one that God sent him to that he'll be able to get away from

the God who created the whole earth, including the city that he's trying to run away to.

It's kind of like when little kids play hide and seek and the way they hide is they cover their eyes and say, you can't see me. It doesn't actually work like that. I can still see you. I don't have the same limitation that you have.

And Jonah is basically doing that to God. It's like covering his eyes and going, you can't find me. I've gone somewhere else. God knows exactly where he is. God is not limited like us.

He is everywhere all the time. He is all-knowing. He knows Jonah's plans before he even decides to run away. And it is ridiculous that Jonah thinks he can run away from the God who has been speaking to him and giving him messages his life.

But as ridiculous as it sounds, you and I do the same sort of thing. We get to the point in our life where we think we're more powerful than God.

[8 : 52] When we face struggles, when we face decisions, it is amazing how self-absorbed we can be to think that we will be better looking after ourselves. I mean, it doesn't take a lot of comparison to understand that we are fairly unimpressive when we stand next to God.

Yet somehow we just block that out of our mind and act like I can handle this better than you, God. I'm struggling to pay rent, but I'm pretty sure I can somehow come up with it. And God is sitting there going, I made money.

I made everything. I own everything. Yet we choose to trust ourselves. It doesn't take much looking at yourself to realise you're actually not in control of anything.

One of the things that reminds me of this regularly is our inability to control the weather. Not that long ago, a fair few of us went to an engagement party for our resident meteorologist.

It rained and we had to move the party to a house. You are not in control no matter how much you want to be. You are not in control of how many cars will be on the road when you're trying to get somewhere in a hurry. You are not even in control of your own health.

[9 : 59] You can try and do things like exercise and eat well that you think will make all the difference, but the reality is you're still not in control. I remember the day quite distinctly, several years ago, when after a series of tests and a whole bunch of issues, I was told that I had a disease and I would have it for the rest of my life.

Now despite what some people would like to say, it's not the result of my lifestyle. It has nothing to do with what I have or haven't eaten. I just have a disease because that's the way God decided for my life to go.

I am not in control and neither are you. No matter how hard I try, no matter how hard you try, no matter how fantastic you think you are, God alone is in control. He created heaven.

He created earth. He did it just by speaking. God can make people sick. He sends plagues on Egypt. He can heal people. We see it over and over again in the gospel. He can part the Red Sea and people walk across as if it's dry land and he defeats even death in his son when he raises him. God can forgive sin and we are reminded over and over in scripture from Job 42. I know you can do all things. No plan of yours can be thwarted. Psalm 135.

[11 : 11] I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods. The Lord does whatever pleases him. There is nothing and no one that can stand between the creator God and his design and his desire.

And yet, when we get faced with situations, we still think that we are more trustworthy than God when it comes to handling what is happening in our lives.

Listen to how God achieves his purpose in Jonah. Look at verse 4. Jonah is running away and it says, verse 4, the Lord sent a great wind on the sea and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own God and they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. Jonah is running away and God could have sent somebody else to go get Jonah.

He could have forgotten about Jonah and sent somebody else to go to Nineveh. But God is so in control of every aspect of creation that he can just make a storm happen in such a way that sailors who spend their lives on the sea are so fearful for their life that they know this is not normal.

[12 : 22] They know somebody has made this storm happen. And straight away they start to ask questions. God can create a storm.

God can provide a fish to swallow Jonah. It could have been judgment. It could have been him saving him. It's probably a bit of both. But what really matters is that it's God who provides the fish. It's there explicitly. Verse 17. The Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. It's God's mighty hand that guides these events.

It's not an accident. It's not chance. It's not unlucky. It's God. Because God has a plan and that is for Nineveh to hear that they are living in a way that angers God and he has a plan to use Jonah to tell them and so he will do whatever he needs to do to make sure that Jonah gets to where he's supposed to be.

When we grab even the smallest amount of how much greater God is than us, how much more powerful, how infinitely sovereign he is, suddenly our attempts to look after our own lives seem kind of stupid.

[13 : 44] The Bible describes our life as being like a mist that appears in the morning for a moment and then is burned up by the sun. Our God is eternal.

We are less than a drop of water and he is more than an ocean. There is no comparison between our God and us. He is indescribably powerful.

Powerful beyond our comprehension. There is absolutely nothing that is too big for God. There is no situation you will face that he is not powerful to change.

So why is it that we still presume in our lives to think we can control things better than he can? Why is it that we hold on to things till the absolute last minute until we've been proved powerless before we give them to him?

Why is it that we are so fearful of possibility and circumstance when God has shown himself time and time again to be all-powerful, to be in control?

[14 : 47] But maybe your issue isn't whether or not God can control things. Maybe your question, maybe the doubt in your life is, will God control things in my life?

Will he control things in a way that is good for me? Maybe you can acknowledge God is powerful and his big plan of sending Jesus and saving people. Yep, I get that. He's in control.

But whether or not I get picked on at school, whether or not I can afford to pay my rent, those are just kind of minor details and God doesn't have time for those. Maybe you're not confident that God cares enough to work into your specific day-to-day moments.

I remember just after Sal and I got married, we moved into a fairly small house in Newtown. When we got there, there wasn't any furniture and being an old house, there wasn't any storage either.

So I survived what most young married men fear, an afternoon trawling the aisles of Ikea. The only incentive to get me over the line was the \$2 hot dog and Pepsi that was waiting at the end.

[15 : 51] And it's been incentive to get me back a few times as well. But somehow I survived our journey to Ikea and we managed to buy a cupboard that would house my clothes. And once we got home, people who know me know that I'm not particularly handy.

I'm also not a details person. So I saw the picture on the front cover of the instructions and put that to the side and set to work putting together this flat pack cupboard. Now, I got to the end feeling pretty proud of myself with a handful of screws and nails left over.

That is never a good sign. I also decided that putting the back on the cupboard was going to be a waste of effort because there was a lot of nails that had to go around that. And it already had sides in the top and bottom. So I put it up against the wall and it was kind of a little bit slanted.

I could push it back straight and then I tried to hold it, but I gave up. So I had a slanted cupboard for a few years. But it held clothes. So that's what a cupboard's supposed to do. So I was content. It didn't look great.

It was kind of broken really, but it was holding clothes and that was enough. Is that how you think God looks at you? Do you think he is only interested in you so long as you're breathing and a person and then from his perspective, he's ticked the box?

[16 : 59] Do you think that his interest in you finishes so long as you're alive? Do you think God doesn't care about the details of your life, that he's got bigger things to worry about?

You need to understand that God is a master craftsman. God lovingly and carefully moulded you and shaped you. Before you were even born, before the earth existed, he planned every minute of every day that he would give you.

The psalmist reminds us that God knits us together in our mother's womb. And as your heavenly father, God is intimately involved in every second of your life.

God, as your heavenly father, is heavily invested in every second of your life. Parents don't give birth to their children and then shrug their shoulders and say, good luck, it's up to you now. Parents feed their children. They bathe their children. They clothe their children. They help them when they fall. They laugh with them. They cry with them. Even when children move out, parents continue to ride the bumps that go with kids having their own kids and all the other joys.

[18 : 13] God is our heavenly father and he cares so much more than any human parent. He can't and he won't leave us alone.

Even when it seems like the details of your life are mundane and unimportant, God, as your heavenly father, cares so much for you that he cares so much about those details.

Look at the way God manipulates and directs and guides minor details in Jonah's story so that he gets where he's supposed to get to. Verse 7. Then the sailors said to each other, come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.

They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, tell us who is responsible for making all this trouble for us. What do you do? Where do you come from? What's your country? From what people are you?

He answered, I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the land. This terrified them and they asked, what have you done? They knew he was running away from the Lord because he had already told them so.

[19 : 20] The sea was getting rougher and rougher so they asked him, what should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us? Pick me up and throw me into the sea, he replied, and it will become calm.

I know that it is my fault this great storm has come upon you. God makes sure that the lot falls with Jonah. It's not chance, it's not accident, it's not fluke.

God makes sure that the lot falls with Jonah. God even guides Jonah's words and his conversation so that while Jonah is in the middle of running away from God's plan for his life, God can use him to proclaim to a boat full of scared sailors that the God in heaven is the one who controls the wind and the waves.

In chapter 4, we see God grow a small tree to give Jonah shade. In 1 Samuel, we see God hear the individual prayers of a barren woman and he gives her a son.

God has painstakingly planned out all of creation from day dot in the garden until it comes to its rightful conclusion and not one day, not one minute, not one second has been left to chance in God's plan.

[20 : 30] There is no maybe in God's design. Such is his infinite wisdom and power and such is his love and care that he is perfectly in control.

There is nothing that can stop God but he is so loving that even the unimportant or mundane details to us matter to him.

Now I need to warn you before we move on just because God can and just because God loves you doesn't mean he will always do what you want. It could be that you don't think or you question God's sovereignty because you have prayed for something and you didn't get it because you have prayed to avoid something and you did get it.

God doesn't always promise to do it our way. What he does promise is that he is infinitely powerful, there is nothing that can stand in his way and that he loves us.

That's what he promises. He does promise that he will always work for our good but he never promises that our good will always line up with what we think it should be. God is powerful beyond our comprehension and he cares more than we will ever begin to understand in this life.

[21 : 52] life. If you question whether or not God can work in your situation, the answer is found in Jesus. If you question whether or not God wants to work in your situation, the answer is found in Jesus.

When we get to Jesus, we face the most formidable foe that this life knows, death. And in Jesus' death and resurrection, God proves that there is nothing more powerful than him.

He proves to you that there is nothing you will face in your life that he is not sovereign over. And in giving us Jesus, he proves that there is nothing that he will hold back.

Let me read to you a verse from Romans chapter 8. He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?

In the moments where you doubt God's love for you and his willingness to pay whatever it costs to ensure that you are cared for, that your life is for your good and his glory, remember Jesus.

[22 : 59] God has already given you the most valuable thing he could give you. He's already paid the highest cost he could pay. And it is ridiculous to think that having sacrificed his son, he would then hold back on something else, something small.

The answer to our doubt is Jesus. The answer to our fear is Jesus. But the question remains, what will it look like for us to not simply believe that God is sovereign, what will it look like for us to live that conviction?

What will it look like to show others that we are confident in that? Let me suggest two things. Firstly, if you really believe that God is in control of every part of your life and all of this creation, then you will pray more.

Now that sounds counterintuitive because we think if God's sovereign and he's in control, then God's going to do what God's going to do and there's no point to pray. But if you believe that God is powerful, if you believe that God loves you, then when you are in need, you will fall on your knees and cry out to the one person who has the power to redeem you, to save you, to provide for you. The one person who has the power to work in every situation. In good times, you will stop thanking yourself because you will recognize that it is God who has given you the blessings. You will pray to thank him for your life, for your home, for oxygen, for beautiful weather, for friends, for family, for the countless good things he has given you.

[24 : 30] When you believe that God is sovereign and in control, then like Job, you will be able to proclaim, naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I will depart, the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised.

In darkness and suffering, you will still be confident because your God is powerful and your God loves you. Second thing, knowing that God is in control means peace.

Doesn't mean that your life will be easy, doesn't mean that it will be event free or pain free, but a life that is confident in a powerful loving God, a life that is confident in his unbreakable promise to always, in all things, work for the good of those who love him.

That means, good or bad, whether you can see how God's working or not, if you know your powerful loving God, you can be confident that his plan is still being accomplished.

That even as you suffer and struggle, that God is loving you in that moment, that he is there with you and that he is working for your good and his glory.

[25 : 47] We have the great promise of scripture, Jesus' own words in John chapter 10, I give them eternal life and they shall never perish, no one can snatch them out of my hand.

God's plan for your life finishes in heaven with him. And Jesus promises here that nothing can change that. Once you have trusted him, no circumstance, no doubt, no suffering, no pain, nothing can snatch you out of his hand.

And so whatever you face in your life, you can rejoice confidently in your God who is infinitely powerful and infinitely loving.

With your eternity secure, it is so much easier to live in the temporary difficulties that we face now because nothing can snatch us out of his hand.

God's sovereignty will lead us to prayer and peace just like it did for Jonah. In chapter 2, just after what Gus read, from the belly of the fish, Jonah finally realizes he can't run from God.

[26 : 54] God's plan will not be stopped. And so how does he respond? He prays. He prays because in that helpless moment he recognizes again and afresh God is powerful but God is loving.

God sent that fish to make sure Jonah couldn't get away but also to save him and to give him a second chance to fulfill the purpose that God had given him. Jonah still stuffs up, he still questions God, he still makes mistakes even through the rest of this book but as he is confronted with his powerful loving God he prays and he stops running and he trusts.

Just as we finish I want to give you two challenges. We're beginning a new year. We're a week in and maybe you didn't make a new year's resolution, maybe you did, it doesn't really matter. Forget about new year and just see today as an opportunity to start.

I want to suggest two things that I think will help you this year begin to believe that God is in control. Not to just say it, not just to be able to articulate it but to truly believe.

Firstly, get to know what God has promised you. I think that one of the basic things that leads us to doubt God's goodness is that we actually don't know what it is that he's promised us.

[28 : 17] And so in our moment of suffering or our moment of need, we doubt God because he's not giving us what we want and we think that he should. But it might be that he hasn't promised that. My disease will continue in my body for as long as God leaves it there or until Jesus comes back.

I have a deep desire that he would take it away, it would make my life easier. But God has not promised anywhere that he will do that. When Jesus comes back, I know then, finally, my body will be cleansed and all sickness and death will be removed, but until then there is no promise that that sickness will get healed.

But God does promise me that in all things he is working for my good. If we don't know the promises of God in our dark times and in our doubt and in our good times, we will be distracted, we will doubt, we will question, but when we grab hold of what God has guaranteed in his son Jesus, we will know the peace and the confidence of dearly loved children.

Lastly, sorry, just before I move on, let me re-endorse what Janet talked about before, the Bible reading plan. If you're already reading the Bible another way, that's fantastic, but if you're like me, I've been a Christian for a long time and still every year I struggle to be committed in the way I spend time in the Word.

This would be a great thing for us to do because we would all be reading it together or even a whole bunch of us reading it together and encouraging one another with what God is teaching us and praying for one another in line with what God is teaching us.

[29 : 54] If you struggle and you need structure, please get that Bible reading plan. It's not perfect, but it's designed to help you get to know the promises of God so that you can believe that God is powerful and that God loves you.

And lastly, pray. Ask for God to help you to trust him. No amount of trying really hard to trust God will actually achieve it. No amount of gritting your teeth will actually make the difference.

For us to trust God, we need to see him in all his power and glory. We need to see his love in Jesus on the cross and we need God's Holy Spirit to do that in us.

We need him to transform our hearts so that what we can say and what we think becomes what we believe and how we live. So pray. And not just for yourself.

Pray for your brothers and sisters around you. Pray that we would be a people marked by confidence in our sovereign God. Pray that people, when they meet us, before we even say the words, God is in control, they would see a peace in us that can't be explained any other way.

[31 : 06] Pray that we would be a community that declares the majesty and glory of our mighty, sovereign, powerful and loving creator for his sake.

Give you aâ.