

Jonah

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[0 : 00] If you are joining us tonight and you haven't been around, we are in the middle of a Jonah series that's not really a Jonah series, for those of you who didn't catch that last week. So we're kind of looking at the Jonah narrative, but more looking at some topics that come up in the Jonah narrative.

And tonight we're going to continue doing that. So it's worth keeping your Bible open to that Jonah passage, but we are going to jump around a little bit as well. So how about I pray, and then we'll get stuck into it.

Father God, we thank you for bringing us here tonight. We thank you for the incredible joy of new families that will be beginning soon. We ask that you would watch over and protect Asha and Jess and Susie and James as well, that you would prepare them for what it means to be a family and that you would use their families for your glory.

Lord, we ask that tonight as we gather as a bigger church family, that you would prepare us to hear you speak, that you would strip away anything in our minds that would block that, and that as we sit under your word, you would change us and you would reveal yourself so that our lives are to your glory.

Amen. I wonder what it is that you are expecting to happen in the next 20 minutes. I say 20 minutes, but I said that this morning, and in truth, it was a little bit longer.

[1 : 13] But what is it that you're expecting to happen in the next little while? As we arrive to church each week, as somebody like Amy just did comes and opens the Bible and speaks, and reads it, and then someone like me or Steve or Chris or Brian gets up and preaches, what is it that you expect to happen in that moment?

What about in your community groups, or maybe as you do your own quiet times at home, what is it that you expect is going on? What is it that you think you are doing when you sit down and you open this book that we call the Bible?

I was reflecting on that this week, and the reason was I thought about it, and I probably have 10, 11, 12, 13 Bibles at home. I've got lots of English Bibles, lots of NIVs, a few other random translations as well, and that even doesn't include the ones I have on my computer or my phone or, for some of you, your iPad.

And I was thinking, I actually don't know where some of my Bibles are. Some of them are probably on bookshelves. Some of them might be in piles of paper, on the coffee table, in my car, in my backpack.

One's right here. Most of them are worn. Some of them have, like, stains from Coke that I've spilt on them. They've got pen marks in them. They've got torn pages.

[2 : 27] One of them's about to come out from the spine. This particular one is missing about three words from Ephesians chapter 2, which is really important that I know off by heart when I get to Ephesians chapter 2.

So, basically, I was thinking about it because the way I treat my Bibles is sometimes just like a book, like any other book that I might have or might own.

And the reason this stuck out for me is I did some reading a little while ago on the way that Muslim people handle their scriptures, the way they handle the Quran. They are meticulous compared to me, and I think it's fair to say compared to us.

They wash their hands before they even touch the Quran. Almost every Muslim memorizes significant chunks of the Quran in Arabic so that they can use it in their prayers.

And if a copy of the Quran is damaged or a page is torn, like my one now, you can't just throw it away. You can't just recycle it. In some cases, what they will do is they will actually put it into a stream and let it float away.

[3 : 29] Something symbolic about it. They will ceremonially burn it or they'll find a remote place and bury it especially. All this for a book that we would say is fictitious.

And yet, we treat our book, which we say is the Word of God, just like any other book. And I wonder if that's the issue, is that we have taken this thing that God has given us and it's become just like any other book, like Twilight or Harry Potter.

I mean, don't get me wrong, we think it's a good book. Sometimes it makes us happy. Sometimes it makes us sad. Sometimes it's challenging, but it's kind of just a book. It's like we've kind of lost the purpose of what God gave us the Bible for.

One of the joys of watching my little boy grow up is watching him discover new things. A development in our family over Christmas is that he's now crawling. That's exciting and scary because you've really got to lock stuff up now.

But one of his favourite things to do is to find stuff that he's not supposed to have and stick it in his mouth. My keys are a personal favourite of his. I don't know why. It's metal. It can't be nice to eat.

[4 : 44] I assume it's dirty and probably got germs all over it, but he loves it. He puts it in his mouth and you can hear him tapping it on his teeth, the two of them that he's got, and chewing on it all around his gums and stuff like that.

For him, keys are perfect for teething. But in actual fact, those keys have a significant job to do. They have to start my car so that I can get around and go places. But for him, he's kind of got a lesser job for it and he's settled for that.

And I wonder if that's what we've done with the Scriptures. The Scriptures have a significant purpose. God gave them to us with an agenda and with an outcome in mind. And I wonder if we have settled for making them just another book that we read, just something that might teach us some information.

And I wonder if we have misunderstood just why God gave us his word and just what it means to have it in this form that we have it. And so what I want to wrestle with tonight is I want to rediscover God's word and why God has given us his word.

So I want to look at three things particularly. First one is we need to understand that the words we have on the pages, the words that Amy just wrote out for us from Psalm 1 and from Jonah 3, these are not just human words.

[5 : 55] We live in a culture where if something is old, it has credibility. If you read something that somebody said 50 years ago, suddenly it is wisdom. It is good advice.

But if the same advice was written down yesterday, we have to wait a little while and see if it has actually got any credibility. But the Bible is not just old wisdom that has kind of gained credibility over time because it is older and older and older.

The Bible is actually God's words. We sometimes call it God's word and that is right, but we have to understand that the words are God's. This is not just random thoughts.

This is God speaking. In the Old Testament, when God spoke, people were scared. If you think of Mount Sinai, for example, God came down to speak to his people and it was so scary for the people that they insisted that someone else stand between them.

They sent Moses off and they said, Moses, you go and hear from God because we are scared to hear the voice of God speak. We are nervous to have God speak directly to us because we know who he is and we know how powerful his word is.

[7 : 00] And we need to understand that the same God speaks in his word. This is not just a book. This is God's mouthpiece to us.

This is his means of communicating with us. When you read a letter that is sent to you, you don't kind of step outside the letter and dispassionately just read what's going on. And, you know, it might be a letter of somebody telling you how fantastic you are.

At that point, you don't step outside of that letter and think, well, I can see why they said that sentence and they must be talking about someone great. When you read a letter to you that says you're fantastic, it makes you feel good.

When you read a letter to you that says you're a jerk and you shouldn't have done this thing, it might offend you. It might make you feel bad. And it's the same here with God's word. You've got to understand this is not something that you sit next to and study and find information from.

Every time we open these pages, God is speaking to you. God is not speaking near you. God is not speaking merely to other people.

[8 : 02] This is his word to you. Now, it's true there is historical context. There is the people of Israel. There's all that stuff going on. But that doesn't change that this is God's word to you.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, Paul says this to the church that he's planted there. It says, Paul went to this church and preached the Old Testament.

He opened God's word to them and he converted them. And the Bible was God speaking to them. It was the story of Israel's rescue from Egypt. It was the story of creation.

It was the story of Abraham. It was all that. But in those stories, God was speaking to the church at Thessalonica. And in the same way, what we read now is God speaking to us.

Now, it is good and helpful for us to understand what's going on in the history, to understand the background, to understand the context. But it matters most that we actually approach it expecting to hear from God.

[9 : 22] Not expecting to find out about Jonah and a whale and thinking, great story. But expecting God to tell us something. To show us something. Because God's word is powerful.

The scriptures open by showing us this picture of creation in which God creates by speaking. God's word does things. And so we need to be clear that when we open this book and when we hear God's words, his word will do things.

His word will achieve an outcome. It can't just wash past us. We can't be a passenger. We can't be passive with it. We need to expect that because this book comes from the words of God, who is sovereign and powerful and authoritative, it will achieve something.

It's addressed to us to achieve something in us. So first thing is that we've got to understand that this is God's divine word. This is God speaking to us.

But the second one is just important. Because God is speaking to us, it means something's going to happen. God's word does stuff.

[10 : 33] It never doesn't do stuff. And I don't just mean empathetically, like when you're reading Twilight and you wish you were Bella. And not just that sense where you cry in a sad story. I remember the first, it was actually a movie, so I'm cheating a little bit.

The first movie that made me cry was The Power of One. I'm a softie at heart. But it was a sad story. I was horrified at the racism and the injustice that happened.

But the Bible's not like that. The Bible's not supposed to make me look at it and go, wow, I can't believe that injustice. That's horrible. Wow, I wonder what new book is out. And move on. Because that's what happened with Power of One.

I didn't cry last time I watched it. God's word is different. It achieves specific outcomes. I want you to quickly, we're going to jump through Jonah, and I want to show you a couple of examples of what I'm talking about.

Jonah 1.1. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it. God speaks.

[11 : 31] He gives Jonah a specific command. He says, Go here, and Jonah disobeys and runs away. But God's word still achieves something. We know, because we just read in chapter 3, that eventually Jonah ends up in Nineveh.

So God's word has achieved what it set out to achieve. But more than that, we also know that God's word never fails. Last week, we wrestled with the sovereignty of God and the power of God.

God has a plan. Jonah is going to Nineveh. And so when Jonah runs and disobeys God's word, God's word becomes judgment on Jonah. Because God's will is clear and it's in front of him, and Jonah tries to ignore it and disobey it, the judgment of a storm and a fish is sent.

So that God's word will achieve its outcome. Jonah 1.9. God speaks through Jonah the prophet again to the sailors. Jonah answered, I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.

Jonah is a disobedient prophet. And yet when God speaks through him, when God gives him his words, sailors make vows to God and sacrifice to God and cry out and understand that God alone controls all things.

[12 : 44] Jonah 3.1. God speaks this time and Jonah finally obeys. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you. And Jonah does.

But the big one, I think, in Jonah is Jonah 3.4. On the first day Jonah started into the city, he proclaimed, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned.

The Ninevites believed God, they declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. Now, we know stories like this and it's really dangerous that we miss the significance of this story.

In Jonah, God makes the point of telling us that this is a big city, that it's going to take time. A visit requires three days because there's lots of people there. We know that Nineveh has a king and yet Jonah turns up unannounced as a mouthpiece for God, walks in the gate and says, you are going to be destroyed because of how you're living and every single person in that city repents.

That is significant. We know it's got nothing to do with Jonah because just two chapters ago, Jonah is running away and trying to avoid God. There's nothing impressive about Jonah as a mouthpiece, but God's word, through Jonah, his prophet, achieves the outcome that God desires and that outcome is that that city would repent.

[14 : 08] God's word never fails. God's word will always achieve God's purpose. Every time it goes out in this story, something happens.

Even when Jonah ignores it and runs away, it brings judgment. We learnt last week, God's will is unstoppable and even our disobedience cannot stop God's plans.

God has spoken to Jonah and Jonah will achieve what God wants, whether he likes it or not. God's word is there to guide us in what God's will is.

For Nineveh, it's obvious. He wanted them to turn from his ways, so he sent Jonah to speak to them. And again, an inadequate, imperfect, disobedient prophet with the word of God led a whole city to repent.

even the king strips off his royal robes, gets down in the dirt and acknowledges the God of heaven simply because God has spoken.

[15 : 11] There's no miracles here. There's no visions for the king to show them what God could do and what God will do. God just speaks and that is enough because God's word is powerful.

God's word will pierce us. Hebrews 4 tells us that God's word is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. God's word will convict us and challenge us and maybe sometimes even make us feel guilty. I remember when I was a student at school, I wasn't a great student to have in your class.

I was a fairly proud kid and so that meant if you told me I was wrong, I just got my back up and would yell. And it didn't matter what the cause was, it didn't matter if I'd done something wrong, I just didn't like to hear that I'd done something wrong.

And so teachers would yell at me for talking, for distracting someone, for not doing my work, whatever it was. And as they began to yell, I began to yell. And it would escalate back and forth and I was so proud that I refused to lose in that moment.

[16 : 26] I refused to let them get on top of me and so I would keep yelling and keep yelling until eventually they would break down or send me out or whatever it was and time and time again I'd get flicked off to the principal or the head of senior school or whoever it was.

And I'd walk into the office and I remember having these conversations over and over and over and they'd just tell me that it was rude and disrespectful and what a bad kid I was that I would drive teachers to tears or that I would make them have to go home and do all these things and I would just block it out.

I didn't want to hear that. I don't care if it's true. I don't want to know that I'm damaging somebody. And so sure enough, the next day or a week later, I'd be doing the same thing.

I'd get in a situation where I didn't want to know that I was bad. I didn't want to know that I'd done something wrong and so as soon as I heard that, I would just push and push and push. And now I'm a little bit embarrassed to admit the kind of stuff that I did and the person that I was and I'm very thankful for some teachers who persisted with me and were gracious with me.

But before you judge me, I wonder if you do the same sort of thing with God. We come to church and we open God's Word and we have just read in Hebrews 4, God's Word will judge our thoughts.

[17 : 44] It will judge the attitudes of our hearts. It will pierce us. And I wonder if when God's Word does that, you stop listening. When God's Word shows you parts of your life that don't match up with what it means to be a follower of Jesus, do you switch off?

Don't get me wrong, God's Word is full of encouragement. It's full of comfort and assurance. Last week, we were reminded that God is sovereign and powerful and that He is always working for our good, that He has an unstoppable plan in creation.

But sometimes, God's Word will rebuke you. Sometimes, it will need to show you things in your life that aren't okay.

Sometimes, God will need to rebuke you for words you have spoken in anger, for the way you have maligned someone else, for the private, lustful thoughts that no one else knows about, for the way we rationalize going that few kilometers over the speed limit, for our refusal to forgive people when they hurt us.

If you are anywhere near as sinful as I am, then there is a lot that God will need to rebuke in you. We are reminded in Scripture if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves.

[19 : 12] We are not perfect. And so, sometimes, when we open the Bible, God will rebuke us.

in Isaiah 55, we are told that as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth, making it bud and flourish, so my word that goes out from my mouth, it will never return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

God's word never fails. Just because we sometimes try not to listen or maybe try and run in the other direction like Jonah did, God's word still achieves its purpose, whether that is to guide us and direct us or to judge us for avoiding and running from God.

I remember when I was at college, I found God's word difficult, as strange as that might sound. The way that college is, is that you spend a lot of time jostling for position, if that's the right word.

You arrive at college and there's this unspoken who's the best preacher. There's this constant awareness of who's getting asked to speak at the biggest events, who's travelling around, who's releasing books, who's doing all that sort of things.

[20 : 40] Now I know it sounds childish, but it's the reality. You get there, and for me personally, I found myself over the course of college stopping hearing God's word.

I would walk into a sermon and instead of thinking what is God teaching me, I would think, is this preacher any good? And I could tell you whether or not they were any good. I could tell you if their stories were entertaining, if they were helpful, if they illustrated anything, I could tell you if their structure was clear, I could tell you what they should have said, and I wasn't alone.

I wonder if you ever find yourself in church doing something similar. You walk out of church thinking, oh, I wish that preacher was on tonight. I don't really like listening to this one.

Or, it wasn't a very good sermon, I didn't learn anything. I remember making that comment one morning tea after a chapel at college, to a friend who I trusted and who I still trust, I said that wasn't a very good sermon, I didn't get anything out of it.

And he responded by pointing me to this verse, and reminding me that God's word is doing God's will whether I hear it or not. Now, this doesn't mean that the preacher doesn't have a responsibility to work hard to understand God's word and to preach it clearly, but what it means is, you have a responsibility as well, and so do I.

[22 : 06] As we come to sit under God's word, whether it's a sermon, whether it's your own reading, whether it's the Bible reading, God's word will achieve its purpose. Are you actually coming willing to hear what it has to say?

Or are you maybe trying to pick and choose the things you want to hear? Maybe today you would prefer to hear that God loves you lots. And it's true, and it's good, and it's great, but what if God has something else he wants to tell you?

We need to be people who have ears that are open, who deeply desire that God would speak to us even when it hurts, because we know from last week he's always working for our good.

He's not showing us sin in our lives just to make us feel guilty. He's showing us and reminding us that he is holy and perfect and majestic, and for us to spend eternity with him he needs to cleanse us of the parts of our lives that aren't good enough.

He's preparing us for heaven. But again, the point isn't guilt. That's not God's desire.

[23 : 22] If you come here regularly and you sit and feel a weight of guilt as we are in church gathered, if God's word, you feel like it just points at you and shines a spotlight on parts of your life that you want to be kept secret, that's not God's desire for you.

Guilt is not a wrong starting point because the way that we live is shameful. But the reason God shows us those parts of our lives is because his desire is that we might be purified and cleansed and that we might spend eternity with him in heaven.

It is not a coincidence that in God's word we are convicted of sin but we are also shown Jesus. God speaks to us to show us that we are not good enough so that when he preaches to us of our Saviour, we may catch a glimpse of the majesty of God's love and forgiveness in the face of our disobedience.

God's word is God speaking to us. God's word always achieves its purpose and ultimately that purpose is for us to see God.

God's word is God speaking to God. The way that God rebukes us in Scripture isn't always to say, I saw you speeding. There's no verse that says that. Or I know what you're thinking about that person.

[25 : 00] But what Scripture does, what God does when he speaks is he shows us himself. And as we see his majesty and holiness, our sin becomes apparent very quickly.

We need to be very careful that we are not people who read God's word selectively, who pick and choose the stuff that we like to hear at certain times in our life.

God wants more for you than that. God doesn't want some superficial, I feel great and isn't life fantastic faith. He doesn't want us to understand just the love of him because you can't understand God's love until you comprehend his holiness and his justice.

I've had a conversation with a woman who has left this church. And she said, I just got sick of being told that I was wrong. I got sick of being told that there was things that needed to change in my life.

I just wanted to hear about God's love for me so that I could be ready to handle the week ahead. Now, without judging her situation, she can't understand God's love unless she understands how unworthy she is of it.

[26 : 15] When we are reminded of our own sin, we are driven back to the cross and we see God most clearly because he loves unworthy people like us.

The Bible tells us that as we open God's word, we get to know God better. It's here, in God's word, when God speaks, that we are born again, that we receive new life, that we are shaped, not because of this paper or these words, but because God speaks here.

By his Holy Spirit, this becomes living and active and shapes our heart to love what God loves. This is the only place where you get to see God.

There are some fantastic Christian books to read that are helpful, but this alone is the place that you get to know God. This alone is the place that he has chosen to speak to you, to reveal himself, and this is essential if you want to grow and mature as a follower of Jesus.

Psalms 1 that was read for us earlier paints this incredible picture of when we delight in and meditate on God's law, on his word, we become like a healthy tree. It's planted by a stream.

[27 : 34] It gets the sustenance it needs. It grows, it produces fruit, it prospers. In God's word, we're fed and strengthened. In God's word, we're pruned that we might bear more fruit.

And by God's word, we fulfill the purpose that he has for us. So this is not just an ordinary book. It's nothing like a good story we might read.

This is God speaking to you. This is God wanting to work in your life and shape you. This is God wanting to reveal himself to you. But what does that mean about the way we handle this book?

Should you wash your hands before you open it tomorrow morning to read it? Maybe. It's probably not essential. What will it mean for us to treat this as God speaking to us?

Let me suggest a couple really quickly. Firstly, be prepared. for Israel, having God speak to them was a fearful experience.

[28 : 37] Because the God who was about to speak was the same God who spoke creation. As you prepare for your own quiet times, as you prepare for church, as you prepare for community group, don't come here thinking about 50 other things.

Don't go out late on a Saturday night so that you're so tired when you get here on Sunday you're struggling to stay awake. God wants to speak to you. Come here in the best frame of mind that you possibly can.

Eager to hear him speak. Awake. Alert. Deeply desiring that he might rebuke you so that you might know the joy of his forgiveness. Be eager to know God where he reveals himself in his word.

We need to be regular. There are so many voices speaking into our lives at the moment. I confess this morning that I have somewhat of a Facebook addiction. Now that it's on your phone, I will literally sometimes wake up, turn off the alarm and in the same motion hit the Facebook icon just to gander at what statuses have appeared while I've been asleep.

And maybe you're not as bad with Facebook as I am maybe you read the paper, maybe you check your emails. The first voice you hear for the day, is it God's? Do you even hear God speak to you each day?

[30 : 02] There are so many people telling you who you are, what matters, what's important, but God's voice is the one that matters. We are a church that has as a core value Christ centered Bible saturation.

We want to be people that when life squeezes us through suffering and trial, Bible comes out. As you face difficulty and pain, may the hope and encouragement of God's word be the first thing that comes to the surface.

We need God's word. Memorize it. Read it daily. Do whatever you've got to do. If you're not doing a Bible reading plan this year and you want to, please join us during the one that I've emailed out to you.

It's been a joy this week to get back into Genesis and be reminded of the God who is sovereign. Lastly, be humble and be expectant.

When you open this book, don't let it be about finishing what you're doing. When we read the Bible in church, don't let it be about what's happening after church.

[31 : 20] When you meet in your community group, don't let it be about supper. Don't let it be about anything but hearing what God has to say. Don't close it until he's spoken to you.

Because his word is always achieving his purpose. We want to be people who delight in the opportunities that God's word gives us to repent.

We want to be like the Ninevites. When God says there is wickedness in us, may we humbly repent and acknowledge that he alone is God.

Repentance is joy for followers of God. There is that initial pain and guilt, but all it does is take us to Jesus. It takes us to forgiveness and it takes us to hope.

So let's be people who come to church wanting God to show us what in us needs to change. Because then we can hand it over at the cross and ask that he replace it with something better.

[32 : 25] He replace it with Christ's likeness and a love for him that is growing. Sorry, one more. So be prepared, be regular, be humble and lastly be bold.

God's word does stuff. We need to stop trying to come up with fantastic ways that we're going to introduce Jesus to the world.

This is the way. Jonah is trying to run away from God and he speaks God's word and sailors make sacrifices to God. In your work, in your family, in your school, wherever it is, speak God's word.

If you're looking for ways to share the gospel, there are a bunch of amazing memory verses that will communicate the gospel to people and it's God's words, not yours. And just a tip, he's more articulate than you.

But more importantly, he's more powerful than you. And when he speaks, people have the chance to see him. This is the most incredible gift God has given us, the ability to know him.

[33 : 37] So be prepared, be regular, be humble, be bold and may God transform us to be more and more like Jesus for his sake and for his glory.

Let's pray. Father God, we want to acknowledge that even tonight as we sit and we read your word and we wrestle with what it is to have you speak to us, that there are other things on our minds that maybe all we're focused on is getting to the end.

But God, we ask that you would give us a deep thirst to know you, that you would keep us from being more precious about how comfortable we feel, about how self-confident we feel.

Instead, give us a desire to know you more than anything else, to treasure you more than anything else. Make us people who soak in your word, who delight in your law. Write your word on our hearts, God, that we may live lives that honor you.

God, we want to pray that as we open your word, that it would never be just an academic exercise. But as we hear you speak, help us to see you. Help us to love you.

[34 : 59] Shape our hearts that we may love what you love and hate what you hate. God, I want to pray that if there are people in this room right now who for them it's still the experience that when your word is open, guilt is the first thing they feel.

God, I pray that you may show them your love. Show them your grace. Show them that guilt for us is just an opportunity for joyful repentance.

Father, we thank you so much for Jesus. We thank you that we can call you Father. We thank you that we can sit under your word, that we can rejoice as your people, that we can be confident that you are preparing a place for us.

Lord, every day until you come back, may you reveal more of yourself, that we may know you better, that we may find the fuller joy that is only found in you, and so that the world may see you in us.

Amen. Amen.