

Jonah 1

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[0 : 00] Let's turn now to our second reading to the book of Jonah. Prophecy of Jonah and chapter 1.

Read at the beginning. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, He said, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it.

For their evil has come up before me. But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish.

So he paid the fare and went on board to go with him to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. As we know, this is a very short book of just four chapters.

It's quite an extraordinary book, and it's a book, of course, that captures the imagination. And everybody knows it's one of the... Jonah is one of the Bible characters who has found his way into everyday speech, because even to this day, people who have very, very little or indeed no knowledge of the Bible they still talk of people as being a Jonah.

[1 : 24] And it's amazing how many Bible references have found their way into everyday language. Just for instance, you'll often see people using the expression, The writing is on the wall, of course, which comes from when the hand actually wrote on the wall before Belshazzar.

We read about that in the book of Daniel. There are lots of instances where people use Bible references, maybe without realizing where they originated.

And people can often be termed a Jonah when they're bringing to a certain extent, when things go wrong and people say, Oh, I think this is your fault, and you're a bit of a Jonah.

But of course, as we read here, Jonah was quite a remarkable character. And in many ways, there are aspects about Jonah's life that maybe we can identify with, and there are aspects of Jonah's life I hope we can't identify with.

Now, of course, the book of Jonah is a book that speaks to us about the Lord Jesus Christ, because Jesus himself mentions that. It was one of the...we read that in the gospel according to Luke, because the people were asking Jesus for a sign, and he said to them that no sign would be given to them but the sign of the prophet Jonah.

[2 : 55] And just as that's what he said, that no sign would be given but the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so the Son of Man would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Now, as we know, the Old Testament is full of Jesus Christ. The law spoke of Christ. The sacrifices spoke of Christ.

The poetry speaks of Christ. So many of the prophecies speak of Christ. And so when you go right through the whole sacrificial system, it was all pointing to Christ.

People say the Old Testament doesn't...that it's so different to the New Testament, that the Old Testament is from another...and yes, it is from another dispensation to a certain extent, but there is an ongoing link.

And if we lose sight of the thread that runs right through Old Testament, New Testament, it's all one. And so we see so much of Jesus in the Old Testament as well.

[4 : 03] But we find at the very opening of here, now the word of the Lord came to Jonah. And how thankful we are for the word of the Lord. We're often...we take it for granted.

But tonight we sing it, we read it, we preach from it. And it's all too possible that we become so familiar with the word that we just take it as that which we have.

And we forget so often that this is the word of the living and through God. And it is the most important document that we can have because in it there is life.

God has revealed to us about himself. And we couldn't work out what we know about God were it not for the fact that he's told us. He has shown us in his word.

And this is the most precious document that we have. It is a love letter from God. And God has not only shown us himself, but through his word he has shown us ourselves.

[5 : 11] Because we couldn't really work out who we are or what we're about were it not for the word. And God has also shown us a way to come to him.

He has given us the way of salvation. So everything really that we need for our life as we live it here and for our destiny in what is beyond is all tied up in this word.

So it is the most precious, the most valuable document that we could possibly possess. And it is to our shame if we have the word and never open it.

It is to people's shame that they are trying to get rid of. There are many people who would never open a Bible from one end of the year to the other. And it's quite extraordinary because as we said this is the word of the living and through God.

And we must be careful with this word that we have in case it's taken away from us. Because as we look through history and church history right throughout we see places that once had the word and the word seems to be taken from them.

[6 : 23] We might think it would never reach a stage where God's word could be taken from us. Well, I'm sure Israel never imagined a day when the word would be taken from them.

When they wouldn't have the word. But that happened. And it was prophesied by the prophet Amos. And Amos prophesied with regard to a famine coming in the land.

And he said it's not a famine regarding food. And it's not a famine regarding drink. It's a famine with regard to the word of God. He said the days come says the Lord that I will send famine in the land.

Not famine of bread nor thirst for water. But of hearing the word of the Lord. And no matter how you search for it.

You won't be able to find it. Isn't that extraordinary? And you know I don't think there could be a worse judgment that could come upon people than that the word of God would be taken away.

[7 : 30] So that there would be no impact, no influence of God's word into people's lives. I don't think we can appreciate how desolate, how awful, how empty, how barren, how void people's lives would be.

Spiritually it would be like looking at just a total desert void of any plant life, of any water, of anything.

Spiritually. So we must always be careful and treat this word with reverence and with appreciation and with prayer. And seek that we will always have this word.

Now we find that the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Now this wasn't the first time that the word of the Lord had come to Jonah. We read about that in 2 Kings in chapter 14.

And in that time, Jeroboam II, it was the first Jeroboam who had, remember, written over his life. Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin.

[8 : 38] He was the one who led Israel into idolatry. It was at the time when the kingdom of Judah and kingdom of Israel, when Israel divided. He was the king who had led Israel down the wrong road.

Well, this is Jeroboam II, a long time after that. And we read that he was an evil king. He led the people in the wrong direction. And it was a time, there was a time of great bondage.

And it was a difficult time. And there was a time of intense suffering in the land. But God sent a message through the prophet Jonah of God's blessing coming upon Jeroboam and upon the land.

And that's exactly what happened. That everything was turned round. And God saved his people through this king, Jeroboam. And really, this is quite an extraordinary thing.

Here is this king who is living in wickedness before God. And here is the nation of Israel, and they're suffering terribly, but they've turned their back upon the Lord. And the message of the Lord comes through Jonah to the king, saying, The Lord's going to save you.

[9 : 51] And the Lord saved Israel wonderfully and extended her boundaries so that a time of great blessing and great prosperity came. And, you know, that's extraordinary.

This is one of these instances that shows the tremendous mercy and the compassion of God. And do we not sometimes experience that within our own lives?

Times where we might have wandered from the Lord. Times where we may have become cold in our worship. Times where we might have, as it were, moved to a certain extent.

Times where we may have been blessed. And we know things aren't right with us. And there are lots of things in our Christian life that are just not right. And then we're convicted by the Lord, and it's like an arrow into our heart.

And the Lord reveals to us what we're like and where we are. And we're, as it were, waiting for the hand of God to come down upon us. And we say, Oh, the Lord's going to deal harshly with me.

[10 : 53] But he doesn't. He deals gently and tenderly. And so often, in that way, he melts our heart. And we don't, he doesn't, as the word says, he does not deal with us as we deserve.

And we're humbled by it. And we can't get over the way he has dealt with us. And that's how the Lord dealt with Israel. But unfortunately, they didn't respond in the right way.

And this is where it's very dangerous. Because if our heart isn't melted, and as God deals not according to our deserving, but deals graciously and tenderly with us, and yet we still refuse to submit and to allow this tender heart, as it were, to grow before him, and continue in our disobedient, defiant ways, then the Lord will come.

And he will deal with a heavy hand upon us, which is exactly what happened eventually in Israel's history. But anyway, here is the word of the Lord coming to Jonah.

So, as we read about in 2 Kings, the word of the Lord, it was through Jonah that the Lord gave the message to Jeroboam. And here's the word of the Lord coming again to Jonah.

[12 : 15] And maybe there was an element of excitement in Jonah's heart as the word of the Lord came to him. Am I going to go into the king's palace again with more reassuring words, with a message of God's favor and blessing going to come?

But that wasn't always the kind of message that the prophet was given. Because sometimes it was a hard message. Sometimes it was a difficult message.

And, you know, it's still the same as we go through God's word. God's word brings different messages to us. And if we work through God's word, sometimes God's word is so tender, it is so compassionate, it is so inviting, it is so gracious, but other times God's word is hard.

And God's word is meeting us right where we are. It's challenging. It's direct. And that's it. God is dealing with us and challenging us always as to where we are.

Anyway, the message that Jonah was given was one that absolutely shook him to the very core. The Lord was saying to Jonah, Jonah, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

[13 : 44] Well, Jonah couldn't believe what he was hearing. This was to go to Nineveh, which was the great city in the Assyrian Empire.

And as we know, Assyria was a, it was an extraordinary, powerful empire, a ferocious empire. The Assyrian people were known for their brutality and for their cruelty.

And Jonah couldn't believe that God was asking him to go to this particular people. And so we find Jonah running away, or at least trying to run away.

And people ask, why did Jonah run away? Well, some people think it was because Jonah was afraid. And there may have been an element of fear in Jonah's heart because history will tell us what the Assyrians were like.

They were unbelievably cruel. They delighted in torture and in afflicting people with as much pain as possible. On one city that they captured, they skinned the people alive and covered the walls of the city with the skin of the people.

[15 : 01] That's the nature of the cruelty. Another city that they captured, they killed everybody in it apart from the king. And the king of the king, the Assyrian king, he plunged with a dagger or something through the jaw of the chin of the king and put a chain or a rope through it and led him about like a dog.

So they were not only a war like a ferocious people, they were incredibly cruel, evil. And it's no wonder that their evil had risen up before God.

So people think Jonah ran away because naturally you're saying, imagine me having to go to the very heart of the Assyrian people, barge in and tell them about God's judgment upon them.

They'll, well, literally skin me alive. So some people think that's why Jonah ran away. And others think that he ran away because of the severity of the message, that the message that God had given him was so severe.

He thought, oh, I cannot go and give this message. This is a terrible message. Well, it wasn't that because, you know, Jonah would have been very happy for God's judgment just to fall there and then upon the Ninevites.

[16 : 26] Jonah ran away, we believe, because as you go through the book of Jonah, it becomes clearer, he ran away because Jonah knew his God.

Jonah knew what God was like. And Jonah had figured out that if he went with this message of God's judgment against the city, that it was an order for him to deal graciously with the Ninevites.

Jonah was saying, I know what God is like. And he is expecting me to go with this message to this people, this awful people. And Jonah was afraid that they would repent of their evil and turn to the Lord.

That's why I said at the beginning that I hope while there's many things we may see in Jonah's life we can identify, I hope that there are one or two things we cannot.

And that's one of them. I hope that we would never be like that and ever say, I hope God is not merciful to these people.

[17 : 45] Because you see, the way Jonah was looking at it was he could imagine, and you know he was right, Jonah knew his God so well, but Jonah had many lessons to learn.

God had to deal with Jonah. And that's one of the things we see in this book. Because Jonah, Jonah didn't want God's mercy to come on the Assyrians because you know what he was afraid of?

Was that at the end of the day that these very Assyrians that God would end up being merciful to would come and devastate the land of Israel which is exactly what happened. So Jonah, Jonah had this fear in his heart and so he ran away.

But you see, he couldn't run away because the Lord had given him a message to go to speak to these people. And can I say in passing, here, when you think of the Assyrians, we just mentioned a little bit about what they were like.

The most awful, cruel, wicked, evil people. And God is here sending the prophet of the Lord with the word of the Lord to them.

[18 : 52] Extraordinary. God's mercy. And in passing, may I say, if the Lord puts it upon your heart to speak to somebody, to invite somebody to church, to give somebody a good book, and that somebody being someone that you would say to yourself, but there's no point because this person, I know this person, and this person has no time for God, no time for Christians, no time for church, no time for the gospel.

And yet you feel that God is putting something on your heart to speak to this person, to share the gospel with this person. you do what the Lord has put in your heart because maybe the Lord has a purpose for that person and it's going to be through you.

So we've always got to be sensitive to the burden that the Lord will place upon our heart. And so we mustn't run away like Jonah did or try to run away.

And so Jonah tried to run away from the presence of the Lord because, you see, Jonah was a proud Israelite, a proud Jew. And this was part of what was, it's very difficult for us to understand, but the Jew was exclusive.

They had, they were very, very, very proud people. And they felt elevated above all peoples of the world. And the way, the reason for that, of course, goes way back into the call of Abraham and where Abraham received the great promise of the Lord and that the Lord was going to bless all the descendants of Abraham.

[20 : 48] But what the Jew often forgot was that the blessing that God gave to Abraham, he also told Abraham that he was going to make him and his seed a blessing to all the nations of this world.

And of course, we know that that was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But unfortunately, there was like a no-go zone around the Jewish people and they didn't want any dealings with any of the other nations.

And we see that right down even into the days of Jesus. The disciples couldn't understand how Jesus would engage with other people, with non-Jews, with the woman of Samaria.

The woman of Samaria herself couldn't believe that Jesus was speaking to her because she said, I can't believe you're speaking to me because the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

but Jesus was breaking down the barriers. And even after Pentecost, we find that remember when Cornelius was wrestling with the whole way of salvation and everything, the Lord had to work powerfully in Peter's life in order for the inbuilt prejudices in Peter's heart to be broken down so that he would go and meet a non-Jew.

[22 : 18] Peter couldn't get himself to go and meet Cornelius. Cornelius wasn't a Jew and Peter initially couldn't go to meet him. We might find that almost unbelievable to understand but that's what it was like.

And so this is where Jonah was and he couldn't believe that God was asking him to go to this heathen people and to bring the word of the Lord to them.

I hope that we will always have a gospel heart an evangelistic heart that we will always want to go out with the gospel.

It is our obligation and it is our duty to live the gospel to let the gospel shine within our heart that we will always be ready to speak to people to give an account of the hope that is within us not that we will bombard people but that we are always ready to testify that it is our desire to bring people under the word.

It should be I think it's something every person in this church should make it their aim to invite in the course of the year somebody else to come with them to church.

[23 : 33] They may refuse but they may come. Bring them under the word because a church that has no concern for any outside themselves is a church unless the Lord intervenes in a wonderful way that is heading for an extinction in eventual time.

It's a very message that Jesus was instilling into the lives of the disciples as he was going from go into all the world.

Tell everyone. This is the great message of the gospel. And so Jonah had an incredible amount to learn because we have got to remember that the church were told in Timothy that the church is the pillar and the ground of truth.

Just like the big pillars that you would see long ago holding up the buildings. That's what the church is like. It's the pillar and the ground of truth.

Long ago, obviously they didn't have the radios and television, et cetera, to spread news about. They used to write news and if there were news bulletins the news of the day would be put on big placards and they would be pinned or stuck to these great big pillars and freestanding pillars so that as people passed by they could see and read what was happening in the news.

[25 : 09] And in a sense that's where the gospel, that's where the church is. That is what we have to be about because we have the truth. You know, it's actually when you think about it, it's very serious.

The Lord entrusted, this is what we read about in the New Testament, he entrusted the gospel to Paul and to the other apostles.

He entrusted it. It's like I'm giving this into your trust, into your care. Protect it, keep it, but share it, but be true to it.

Don't add to it, don't take away from it, keep it, but pass it on, pass it on, spread it out, but keep it, keep it through. And that's how it is.

We have it to this day, and that's our duty. We have it, we must keep it, we mustn't add to it, we mustn't detract from it, but we've got to spread it, we've got to put it on, pass it on.

[26 : 11] It's been entrusted. The church is the pillar and the ground of truth. And so this is the great duty and responsibility that we have.

But Jonah wanted to run away. And so we find Jonah, he is running away. But you know, Jonah cannot run away.

And you know, sometimes the word, and with this we finished just now, may I say to anybody in here tonight who has not come to faith in Jesus Christ, let me ask you the question, are you trying to do what Jonah did?

Jonah was trying to run away. He was trying to run away from God and his word. And if tonight you are rejecting Jesus, that's exactly what you're doing.

You are trying to run away from God and his word. Why? When you think about it, that's the most illogical thing to do.

[27 : 20] To run or to try to run away from God in his word. Because he's speaking to you. And he's speaking to you by way of command.

He's speaking to you by way of invitation. And he's saying to you, you have to get yourself right with me. How long are you going to stay outside the fold?

You're so close. Week in, week out, you're so close. But you're still staying outside. You're trying to run away from me.

Well, you know, my friend, at the end of the day, we can't. Because God will eventually meet up with us. He'll either meet up with you in mercy or in judgment.

Just now, it's a voice of mercy. Please, please, don't try and run away any longer. If tonight you are a believer, and you know you're not where you ought to be, and the Word of God has been challenging you for maybe, I don't know, the last while, ask the Lord to give you the heart to submit before it, so that you will not run away from it.

[28 : 42] Because we can all be guilty at times of trying to put our fingers in our ears and saying, I don't want to hear that. That's not what I want to hear today.

But it's what the Lord wants you to hear today. And we often have to face up, and sometimes the Word of God is uncomfortable. Sometimes it's wonderful. We open it and say, wow, that's just what I need.

Other times, it's like a knife. It's like getting the belt. And we say, ow! And we have a choice. We either turn the page and say, I'm not going to read that, or else we're going to say, Lord, forgive me.

Please help me in this. Let us pray. Oh, Lord, our God, we pray that as we have come under your Word tonight, that that Word will speak into our hearts, and that we won't be dismissive of it, but that we will surrender under it.

We pray to bless us and enrich us in the Gospel. we pray, Lord, for the fellowship tonight, and we ask, Lord, that thy hand will be upon us all, and that we might indeed know the riches and the mercy and the grace of God.

[30 : 02] We pray to be with speaker and hearer alike at the fellowship, and we pray that we might know the enriching blessing of God in everything.

Lord, watch over us, do us good. We pray, Lord, for those who have experienced and received bad news, and those, Lord, who are struggling with the mystery of your providence.

Watch over us all, and take away our sin in Jesus' name. Amen.