

When God's Messenger Runs

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[0:00] Okay, let's turn our thoughts then to Jonah, particularly verse 1 to 3, and we will be referencing! Chapter 4, verse 2 as well.

! When you come to a book like Jonah, I think it's one of the most important things in terms of starting off looking at Jonah is that you see yourself in the message, or you see a little bit of Jonah's heart in ourselves. I think the shocking reality for us that when we do and look at Jonah, the shocking reality is we're more like him than we think.

And that's the challenge I hope that we are willing to face up to. So, when we hear the hard call of God, in his case, to go to Nineveh to a people that he despised and hated because of what they did, and they were an enemy of Israel. But we might find it difficult with some neighbors, difficult people around us, and we might actually be a little bit more like Jonah than we realize.

And the challenge, of course, is to realize that God is sovereign, God is all-powerful, God is gracious, and so on. And he will empower us as we live our lives for the glory of Jesus, even with the most difficult people around us. Because our calling is to be like Jesus, not just as we gather and sit beside each other in church, but to those that we are called to go out to. Because that is what God called, Jesus called his disciples to do, to go to all the ends of the earth, to all the people groups in his name and his power and his authority to make disciples of all nations. And here God calls Jonah. And immediately you see the struggle that he faces. Now, we don't know a great deal about Jonah other than some words that are mentioned for us in 2 Kings 14. And the words that are recorded for us from Jonah there are that he confirmed in the time of Jeroboam that the Lord was building the boundaries or rebuilding the boundaries of Israel. That's all we know. But why is that important? Well, if you go back to the previous verses that what the Lord revealed to Israel and to Jonah and to everybody around them was this, that during the time of Jeroboam II, it says that he did evil in the eyes of the Lord which had caused Israel, which he had caused Israel to commit. And this is the challenge I think that we always face as Christians. When we have a culture and we see things moving and changing in our culture and the impact it has on the Christian church, on the gathering or mission, the fear that we might have, that we might get a mouthful from whomever we have, in a sense, we might also have a disparaging view of the mission field that you're called to go to.

And that is what is exposed here. The hypocrisy of Jonah is this, that he knew the repeated mercy of God in the life of Israel. The ups, the downs, the ups, the downs. You cannot read the Old Testament without seeing it for yourself.

[4:19] Times of great, you know, terrible events and terrible lifestyles, etc., in there by, led by kings and Jeroboam in this case, his sin came up before the Lord. And it is easy to forget that, to forget even our own sin from what we have been saved from, and see others and their lives as much worse and much more terrible than what God had to deal with with you and me.

And it's a dangerous move from the church. And it's an easy thing to fall into, an easy pattern. And it is so easy to forget what the Lord saved you and me from. Now, granted, most of you were probably not like me back in the day. And all the mistakes and the wrongs, etc., I'm very much an unlikely candidate. But God, but God stepped in. But God saved. God saves the unexpected, the rascals, the people of Nineveh. He showed, he called Jonah to go to these people that he despised, forgetting the very sins that the Lord had repeatedly forgiven and restored Israel time and time again. So, it is easy to fall into that pattern. And that's the challenge I think we face as we look at Jonah, as we think about the first three verses and also his own confession regarding God's character when it comes to dealing with the sins of people. Now, one writer said this. He says, challenging us about our Christian lifestyles, our mission, etc. He said, your Christianity is not defined by Sunday morning when you're throwing your head back and singing praise to God.

He says, that's the easy call of God. That doesn't define your Christianity alone. Our call is to be Christ-like in every day and in submission to Him and in worship every single day of our lives. Now, that includes the very clear command of Scripture, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. And as we all know, sometimes they can be the most difficult of people.

Sometimes God calls us to hard things, to hard places. It's not easy, but we are never going on our own strength.

And so, you can understand in one sense Jonah's unwillingness to go, but he had known God's redeeming grace repeatedly in the life of Israel.

[7:48] And it's something that he didn't want to share with the people of Nineveh. So, when God is calling you to tough places, what's your response?

How do you respond to Him? We could say, and I think I've probably done this myself, Lord, lead me anywhere you want me to go.

Except, and except, or in Jonah's case, Nineveh. In fact, his effort was to try and reach as far away from Nineveh as possible and go to Tarshish, the end of the then known world would be Europe to most commentators.

So, what do I hope that we do this evening as we look at these words, and as we think about the tough call of God on your life? What if He's calling you to ministry, and you feel there are so many hurdles in your way? What if He's calling you to minister in some way or other to people at work, or whatever it may be? And sometimes you just simply resist and don't fulfill that calling because it's too tough for you and for me.

Well, here we find out that God is truly sovereign and all-powerful. And that is what we need to take on board in the tough calls that He gives us, the people that He seeks you to minister to, because He goes with you and before you, and it is through Him that people come to know Him. So, what is the first thing then about Jonah that we should take consideration of? It's his heart. His heart.

[9:54] You know, you read these words, the first three verses there, and there is clearly something about the prophet. He does a runner. He just runs. How do we know his heart? It comes from his confession in chapter 4. He says, O Lord, and he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarsus. For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

There is the revelation of what he knew about God in this moment.

He knew the character of God in every aspect of his life, and what he said about the character of God, what God displayed even through the message of judgment in the time of Israel, was a God who was compassionate and slow to anger and rich in mercy, and who relented when the people prayed in repentance. What an incredible testimony to the majesty and the grace and the wonder of God.

God, but it exposes his heart. It shows you how he was so disturbed at the thought that these terrible people might discover, feel, receive that compassion, that love, that slow to anger and rich in mercy, God in heaven, who relents from disaster.

[12:19] There is the exposure of his heart and what he is truly thinking, and that he is willing to be a roadblock to these people ever responding to God.

It is really difficult to try and understand how someone could get to that place. Very difficult. How someone refused, or he was, yes, he refused till later, but he refused to go to Nineveh, wanted to go to Tarshish because he didn't want to proclaim the gracious judgment of God.

Now, one or two of you might be saying, did he just say gracious judgment? Yes, that's exactly what I said.

God's gracious judgment. Now, if you're a non-Christian and you're hearing the word judgment, it's probably the case that you really don't like that word, and very often we don't do a great job when we're talking about the gracious judgment of God.

A lot of us have probably never put the two words together. But I call it gracious judgment for a reason. You can call it gracious revelation. God knew the heart of the people of Nineveh.

[13:56] Their sin had come up before him. It also had come up before Jonah, and Jonah's response was, really, in a sense, Lord, just bring rain down judgment upon them.

But when the Lord reveals judgment in this way, in this gracious judgment way, what He is doing is, is He exposes the heart of people. And if you're a non-Christian this evening, when He reveals your heart, the point of it is to bring you to a place where you are no longer on the throne of your life, but that He is on the throne, and He is the one who is supreme Lord and sovereign King.

He is the one who judges. But He is also the gracious one who will relent when you turn to Him. He is the one who provided the means for you and me to turn away from this judgment because He gave His only begotten Son, and judgment was poured upon Him for the sin of the world.

And that's the incredible truth in front of you, that this prophet of God, God spoke to him.

God called him to a hard calling to get up and go, and not just simply lob grenade bombs of judgment on the people of Nineveh.

[15 : 28] Pick yourself up, go to Nineveh, and proclaim what I have told you to proclaim, that their sin has come up before me, and judgment is coming. Why does the Lord do that?

So that you can turn. So that you can turn from it, from its outcome. When you want to be Lord of your own life, but there is only one Lord, and it is Him who offers you mercy and love and compassion and salvation and transformation and the new birth and eternal life.

That's why I call it His gracious judgment. Now, of course, we know the outcome when He goes to Nineveh and preaches it, and you read that in chapter 3.

The whole city, everybody turns to Him. And I just want to point this out to you. There are different responses in the Bible to God's gracious judgment.

God's gracious judgment came to Nineveh. The whole place, every person, and even sackcloth and ashes on animals. It was incredible. What a glorious moment it could have been for Jonah to be remembered as the prophet to have seen 100 plus thousand people come to the Lord.

[16 : 51] But He despised them. I want to give you another example about God's gracious judgment that wasn't received. Go back to the time of Noah, when their sin had come up before the Lord, and there was 120 years, and only some were saved.

And judgment reigned. The point is this, that when God speaks judgment, He wants you to come to Him because it is Him who can heal you, save you, change you, and make you His child and part of His family.

That is the God that Jonah confesses. I knew that you were gracious, a gracious God, merciful and slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

That's the call that I have for you tonight if you're a non-Christian. For us as Christians, then, what an incredible challenge it is.

You know, if the statistics are right, and I cannot confirm the statistics are right, but I have heard many a preacher and many a person say that if we in this nation only have about 2% of evangelical, 2% of the nation engaging in evangelical Christianity, things are rough.

[18 : 42] Times are tough. But God hasn't changed. It is the same God who is slow to anger and rich in mercy.

The same God. Why has the church diminished so? We can give loads of different reasons, but I want us to really think that through.

When you hear what Jonah confesses in light of what took place in Nineveh, that God relented, God poured out His grace, God brought these people to life, He hasn't changed.

And our calling is to go in His name, His authority, even to the tough people in this town. And many a person who lambasted a Christian eventually came to know the King of Kings, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, His heart is exposed to the reality of who God is. And we, the church, need to take confidence, if I can put, it's a weak word, I suppose, but it's, you get the idea.

[20 : 06] And who we are redeemed by, saved by, whom we worship in song, whom we worship in life, whom we seek to give glory in our lives, it is the same Lord who provided His only begotten Son, the same Lord who raised Him from the dead, defeating sin and death, the same Lord that raised us to life.

don't be a Jonah and run away from the hard call of God. Jonah did something he knew he couldn't do.

When we were singing our first praise, again, I hope that most ministers try and pick something relating to the text and not just our favorite bits of Scripture, you hear the words of the psalmist, which I'm pretty sure he would have known.

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me, you know when I sit and when I rise, you perceive my thoughts from afar, you discern my going out and my lying down, you are familiar with all my ways before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, you hem me in behind before, you have laid your hand upon me, such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

[21 : 44] If I rise on the wings of dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, his Tarshish, even there, your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me.

He was delusional and we are delusional ourselves or lacking in understanding that this God is our God and his almighty power, he uses his church as a vessel of grace to the world that is broken. And that is our call to go. It is on his name, his authority, on his provision and on his message that reveals the heart of people and exposes it to his living word.

And some will say, no can do. I don't want to know. Some of us said that a few times. But I praise God that he continued to this day even in my stubbornness when I finally heard him say, come, follow me.

Three things I want to say then before we conclude. And this is the challenge I hope that we will take regarding what we see here with Jonah.

[23 : 12] The first thing is this and listen carefully. Jonah ran from God because he did not have God's sensitivity to sin.

Just pause and think of what I'm trying to say. You see, many of us have preached judgment and we let people know the full force of the word in that moment.

what I mean about the sensitivity is that God knows their predicament. God knows their situation.

And we go with that sensitivity knowing that the outcome is dreadful.

But we go with a sensitivity in that God will relent. That God will relent when a person repents and turns to the Lord. That is the message that we're called to go with.

it is a sensitivity to reignite in us a sensitivity to the fallenness of man, to the broken world around us, that the testimony of the church to the majesty of Jesus is getting lower and lower and dimmer and dimmer.

[24 : 34] it is time for us to have that sensitivity to be driven by the character of God to a people that are lost. And even if it's just one or two or five hundred the call is to go.

We need that sensitivity. and it is driven by our own life and knowledge. Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me.

That's the first thing. The second thing is this. It is clear that Jonah resisted the plan of God. The plan was simple but hard.

Go to Nineveh and speak. the message of judgment against it. That I have seen their sin. The plan of God.

We know the plan of God. It is preached. I've listened to Calum and others preaching. I know that the plan of God has been spoken about repeatedly in this place and in other churches.

[25 : 46] Praise be to God. But we need to not only listen and hear the words but put them in action. Put the plan of God in action.

Jesus said it to his disciples and I repeat go therefore go therefore into all the earth and your town. Now I am very grateful for the opportunity of speaking about Mission International. It is my delight to be able to do that and to raise the profile of Christians in different places. But I marvel at the fact that these people speaking in tough situations or preaching in tough situations.

Myanmar with a military junta bombing just because they can because they want to. They bomb churches and everything so that people aren't meeting together.

And yet every month I get a report that the pastors and the evangelists are going to different places throughout Myanmar. And sometimes they say we spoke to 60 people.

[26 : 55] Nobody professed faith in Jesus. And other times they tell the story of many people reached 20 interested 10 baptized.

The Lord is working in the tough places. What I fear is that we've got comfortable with church being our safe place.

It should be a safe place. Absolutely. But it's a commissioning place, an equipping place for us to be prepared to do the works of good service and proclamation of the gospel, the message, to fulfill the plan of God through the New Testament church to the world around us.

That's what we're called to. Thirdly, Jonah did not have a commitment to the grace of God and the outworking of that grace through the message of his word.

That is such a challenge. It really is. There are times when the Lord confronts me about my own heart, about my lethargy at times, whatever it may be.

[28:10] He speaks and confronts through his word, through preachers, but through the reading of his word, through reading books. Just, he does it and I freely admit it.

Grace to us and we know it full well. And this is the challenge, whether it's to people who have wronged us or offended us or the people that we are called to on mission or people within the church that we don't get on with.

We may be able to sing out loud, amazing grace that saved a wretch like me. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. But we're becoming resistant to sharing that grace to someone who may offend us, to the culture around us that is anti-Christian.

That's where we were. Some of us didn't grow up in church, but that's where we were. Ever so thankful that someone stopped one day to just give me a tract and start the discussion.

Didn't go down too well in some ways, but you get the gist. Someone did it. Someone heard.

Someone was a practitioner of the grace of God to go to rebels, and they picked six or seven of us in our ranger scars.

[29:43] He's joyful this weekend. It'll not last long. But there we are. They came to people that they wouldn't probably normally speak to, but they did. And eventually, as God opens doors and whatever he did to bring me to a place where I professed faith in him, I'm ever so grateful for that moment.

We have to have a commitment to the grace of God, to the plan of God, and understand God's compassion for the broken world that we're called to go to.

We need to be equipped, encouraged, disciplined, prepared for action. But it's driven by grace. It's driven by the grace of God for a broken world that he knows full well that he gave his son for.

And it is him who not only took judgment upon himself and the judgment of my sin and your sin upon himself, but that same one who exchanged that judgment for his righteousness and my standing and your standing as a believer completely altered and changed because of the grace of God, the saving grace of God.

but we also live by that grace. That's the challenge. Are we channels of his grace?

[31:23] Are we throttling that grace for whatever reason? Are we listening to the hard call of God and depending on him in humility because he strengthens us if we come with humble hearts saying, I can't do this by myself.

And that is a delight to God because God resists the proud. And maybe churches in this country have demonstrated more pride than humility when God resists pride.

But he will work with the humble, restore, empower us to fulfill this commission of grace to a broken world.

So we have that challenge in front of us as we kind of close our time together. Do you have God's sensitivity to sin? Do you understand the plan of God for you as a Christian and as a church?

do you have God's commitment to this incredible grace, this gracious God who blessed us with His grace when we were lost?

[32:44] Well, He wants us to do to others what others did for you when they were channels of God's grace. God saves.

But He uses the vehicle of the church and His people to proclaim the message and not be afraid in a time when the culture is difficult and resistant.

He is still sovereign over all nations. He is still ruler and power over all. He is on His throne and He wants to use every single gift He has bestowed upon you, His people, you this church, His people, to use every gift for the glory of His name, for the blessing of the people of Stornoway or if you include Plasterfield and different places like that in Stornoway these days, I think you do, but in all the places that you belong to.

And I believe that God will do great things when we're a humble church that comes with an open heart knowing we cannot do it ourselves, but He will do it through us for the glory of His name.

We pray all things. Let's pray. Lord God, our Heavenly Father, Lord, we just pray that you will continue speaking to us and challenging us, checking our hearts this evening, Lord, searching us.

[34:24] May Your Word be like a mirror to us, exposing the weaknesses of our character, the flaws in us that feel anxious about our time, but this is not our home, Lord.

This is, grace, we know that we are in the in-between time, and it is still the time of grace until You return. And I pray then that we would have that sense of urgency, be prayerful, be willing to share the grace of God with people, in the hope that they too may come and join us at Your feet.

Lord God, our Heavenly Father and Savior, we thank You. Lord, I pray that You will move us as a people and we commit ourselves to You.

I pray in a new way to see You do great things in this town and further afield. for the glory of Your name we pray.

Amen. Okay, we're going to sing our final praise this evening from Psalm 130, and that's in the Psalter, page 421, actually.

[35:58] Lord, from the depths I cried. My voice, Lord, do Thou hear, unto my supplications voice, give an attentive ear.

We'll sing the whole of that psalm to God's praise. For from the dead to thee I cry, my voice for dear thou dear, Until thy son in nature's heart, in heaven at every year.

Lord, who shall stand in power, O Lord, to spark iniquity?

But yet will thee forgive, that if thou hast me, I wait for God, my soul of me, My hope is in His word.

For from the dead to thee I cry, my soul of me, My hope is in His word.

[38:07] I say, Lord God, may I to watch, The Lord be not to see.

Let Israel open the door, For with Him bless His King.

And when Jesus redeemed for His name, And from all His name, He will be, He is blessed and redeemed.

And now may the grace and the mercy and peace and joy and the love of God that we find in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, may these blessings rest upon you and dwell in your lives now and until you meet them face to face.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.

[40:22] Amen.