

Jonah in the Sea

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[0 : 00] Jonah chapter 1, beginning at verse 1. 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.

Then 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.

[1 : 08] The captain went to him and said, How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God.

Maybe he will take notice of us, so that we will not perish.

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 kind of work do you do? Where do you come from?

What is 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 dry 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. The sea was getting rougher and rougher, so they asked him, What should we do to make the sea calm down for us?

[2 : 22] Pick me up and throw me into the sea, he replied, and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.

Instead, the men did their best to roll back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the Lord, Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life.

Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased.

Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

At this, the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord, and made vows to him. Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

This is God's Word. Let's pray as we come to God's Word. Father, we thank you so much for this exciting chapter, and we pray, please, that you'd help us to understand its significance, and we pray that you'd help us to believe the things we learn about you in it.

[3 : 42] Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, last week, we began to look at this very unusual book from the prophets, God's Word to Israel and to us, through the experience of a very angry man.

Last week, we learned about Mr. Angry. We learned about his work back home in Israel. We learned about the kindness of God to the people of Israel through him. We learned about how undeserved that kindness of God was, given the disobedience of the king and the nation back home.

Jonah has been the spiritual architect of his nation's temporary prosperity, and he is very angry when God tells him to do something different.

We thought about the possibilities, the possible causes of his anger. Does he just hate Ninevites? Does he fear that his people back home are going to lose something because he's being sent somewhere else?

Is he angry at the prospect of losing things himself in being sent to Nineveh? Jonah. Today, we're going to look at the first act of this four-act drama.

[4 : 55] And today, the focus is not so much on Jonah's anger. The focus isn't really on Jonah, actually, in chapter 1. Today, the focus is on God and on what God is doing.

I've given this sermon the slightly prosaic title, Jonah in the Sea, because it's really all about Jonah and his exploits on the sea. Verse 2, A bit of geography.

Nineveh is in the east, that way on the map, as you're looking at it. Instead of going that way, Jonah heads west. He goes to the Mediterranean coast to Joppa, and he gets on a boat and heads out to sea.

And for the rest of the chapter, Jonah is relatively unimportant in the story. And the story really revolves around two main characters. And both of these characters emphasize the fact that this chapter is not so much about Jonah, but about God and what God is doing.

Let me introduce you to the first major character. I think that's the right word in this passage.

Possibly not a character you've thought much about before, and that is the sea.

[6 : 23] The sea is a major character in this drama. It's everywhere in this chapter. Verse 4, The Lord sent a great wind on the sea. Verse 5, They throw the cargo into the sea.

Verse 9, I worship the God of heaven who made the sea. Verse 11, The sea was getting rougher.

What will we do to make the sea calm down? Verse 12, Pick me up and throw me into the sea.

Verse 13, The sea grew even wilder. Verse 15, He's thrown into the sea, and it suddenly becomes calm. The sea is a major player in this drama.

Now, folks, this has little impact with us, I think, because the sea is just the place for us where Scottish people go in the summer to get a bit pinker. But in the Bible, the sea is an image loaded, loaded with symbolic freight.

Ordinary images are often loaded with symbolic freight in human experience. You all know, don't you, the Arabic letter N?

[7 : 30] Don't you? You might not think you do, but you do. You don't, but you do. The Arabic letter N, a dot with a swoosh underneath it. You've all seen that image.

Why? It's the image painted on the door by ISIS of Christians. Neh for Nazarene. It's a symbol now, loaded with massive content and also massive emotional freight.

In the same way for a Hebrew audience, the sea is a loaded word, a loaded image. Cast your mind back to Genesis chapter 1, right back at the beginning of the Bible.

What is the world like after God makes stuff? Well, it's dark, undifferentiated, watery chaos into which God speaks a creative, life-giving word that brings order and light and life.

And from that point onwards in the Bible, the sea, though a perfectly good thing that God has made, is symbolically loaded with ideas of chaos and anti-God hostility.

[8 : 44] it's the opposite to what God's life-giving word produces. And time and again, especially in the poetry of the Bible, the Psalms and the book of Job, the sea, sometimes containing a large swimming monster, note to self, remember, large swimming monster, is an image of hostility to God's purposes.

Just to flip back, keep your finger in Jonah 1 and flip back to Psalm 89 just for an example. You can find loads of these in the Psalms and in Job. What is God like?

Well, look at verse 9. Psalm 89, verse 9, page 598. 598. I'll start at verse 8.

Who is like you, Lord God Almighty? You, Lord Almighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule over the surging sea. When its waves mount up, you still them.

You crushed Rahab like one of the slain. With your strong arm, you scattered your enemies. Here in this Psalm, God's supreme power is demonstrated in the fact that he calms the sea and kills the, in this case, named monster within the sea.

[10 : 05] And often in the poetry of the Bible, you'll find those two images go together. An unruly sea and a monster, both of whom God slays and calms.

Now, back to Jonah chapter 1. Jonah heads for the sea in this chapter.

Verse 3, Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. Notice, when Jonah is told to go to Nineveh, he doesn't just say, no, I'm not going to Nineveh.

He actually goes somewhere else. And he's not a theological idiot. He knows only too well that you cannot run away from God. Look at verse 9.

Look at what he says about God in verse 9. I am a Hebrew. And literally, I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. He knows that the true God is absolutely inescapable because he made the sea and the dry land.

[11:16] So what's he doing in verse 3 then? Where is he heading from? And where is he heading for? Well, notice that twice we are told in verse 3, he ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.

And then again, he sailed to Tarshish to flee from the Lord. What does it mean to run away from the Lord then if he knows that the Lord is everywhere? Well, slightly more literally, it's he ran from before the Lord.

That's the phrase. From before the Lord. And you can find that phrase from before the Lord elsewhere in the Old Testament. Elijah the prophet, for example, uses that phrase about himself. As the God of Israel lives, he says, before whom I stand. It's a prophet word. The prophet stands before the Lord and receives words from the Lord and speaks the word from the Lord to the people. That's, it's a prophet word that. Jonah is running away from before the Lord. He's running away from his job as prophet.

[12:30] He doesn't think he can escape God. In fact, he's totally unsurprised when he doesn't escape God in this chapter. He's running away from his role as prophet. He wants absolutely nothing to do with the work of the Lord anymore.

What does it mean to head to Tarshish? Well, Tarshish is an interesting word in the Old Testament. Sometimes it's used of places and sometimes it's used of the sea in general.

And the places in view when the Bible talks about Tarshish are always places away over there across the sea that we might send a big boat to. And sometimes the word is used of the open sea, the ships of Tarshish, probably means ocean-going vessels in the Bible.

One commentator translates verse 3 as like this, Jonah set out to flee out to sea away from the Lord. Let's put all this together, folks.

What's going on here? Jonah, the prophet, is commanded to preach God's life-giving word to the people of Nineveh. Not only will he not go, but he abandons his before the Lord, speaking the word of the Lord role, and in its place he seeks out the sea.

[13:54] So symbolically loaded with anti-God imagery in the Bible. Now, folks, that is a response with attitude. So great is his antipathy towards God's plan for him that he sets out on a trajectory for chaos, disorder, and death rather than conduct the life-giving ministry of the word of the Lord.

And that's where he finds himself in verse 15, lost in the depths of the sea, quite unable to escape the end point of his choice.

And as chapter 2 makes out, we'll look at this next week, he is rescued from the place of the dead in chapter 2. Faced with the job of preaching God's word to Nineveh, he sets out for the realm of chaos and darkness and death rather than do what God wants.

Verse 3 means, I absolutely hate your plan and I'd rather die than have anything to do with it. Now, the amazing thing about this chapter is that the true God is wonderfully powerful.

God rules the sea. In fact, he rules everything. Even Jonah in this chapter, he rules. Look at verse 4. The sea is totally under God's control.

[15:23] The Lord sent a great wind upon the sea. Verse 9, I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea. Verse 12, it's my fault that this great storm has come upon you. God has done it.

They took Jonah, verse 15, and threw him overboard and the raging sea grew calm. God rules the sea. He is even in control of the large things that swim around in the sea.

Verse 17, did you notice that? The fish may be a big fish, but it is not a mythical anti-God monster. It's a fish and it's God's fish and it does precisely what God wants it to do.

He rules over everything. God is totally in control, even of those things loaded with anti-God imagery. Now, folks, I wonder if you believe that God is completely in control.

It's so easy not to believe that sometimes. So easy. Sometimes the things in the world that seem contrary to God's control are so powerful looking and apparently so in control.

[16:32] It hardly matters where you look in the world. You'll see things like that. Natural disasters, supremely powerful. human wickedness, uncontrollable.

The tyranny of human rule in certain countries in the world, unstoppable. Sickness and death. They'll get us all in the end.

None of those are positive things and often they seem completely in control and often they seem hugely against God's purposes in the world.

but the true God is supremely powerful, really. If you feel overwhelmed by any of those things, do not despair.

The true God is supremely in control. He was in the boat during the storm although it didn't look like it. You cannot see God's control yet from where you are standing but it is so.

[17 : 39] He is much, much, much, much bigger, greater, more merciful, more generous, kinder, more gracious than his people can possibly imagine.

sometimes the difficult side of God's control is that he does things and requires things that his people, creatures as we are, finite as we are, sinful as we are and sometimes turned in on ourselves, sometimes he does things and requires things that seem at the time abhorrent to his people.

they will not seem so in the end. They do seem so now. Jonah is supremely angry at what God is doing.

He no longer wants anything to do with it. He would rather turn his back on everything he's done so far back at home than continue to operate in the realm of God's life-giving word.

And folks, unless we face up to that, I think we'll end up trivializing this book and trivializing the difficulties of life under God's rule in this world. It is very easy to think of Jonah just as Mr. Angry, a cartoon sort of figure, a horrid, racist, spiritual lightweight and to look down on him and think that we could never be angry at God like him.

[19 : 10] But here, Jonah is quite incapable of seeing that God is right to ask us of him. Now, he's not right in that and this book is here to make that clear.

In the end, I take it, Jonah was able to see that God was right and he wasn't. But he's a long way from that in chapter 1 and God is very, very patient with him.

However, amazingly, despite Jonah's fuming rage and total unwillingness to do what God wants him to do, he does what God wants him to do.

That's the surprising thing about this chapter. God's control in this chapter is seen in the other great player in chapter 1, which is the sailors. And we're going to spend the rest of the time on the sailors because they're very important in this drama.

Second big point, the sailors fear the Lord. As Jonah moves away out of God's purposes, he thinks, towards the sea, towards death, the sailors come closer and closer and closer to life.

[20 : 21] And the story is built around three episodes of fear on the part of the sailors. Three times we're told that the sailors are afraid and each time their fear is a response to something that God does and each time they come nearer to grasping who the real God is.

So look first at verse 5, the sailors fear the storm. The Lord sent a great wind on the sea and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up and 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.

They do all the stuff you'd normally do when you're afraid. They pray, verse 5. It's only modern western culture which thinks it's stupid to pray when you're in difficulty.

They take action, verse 5. They throw the stuff into the sea to try and lighten the load. Jonah's careless disengagement, verse 6, seems absolutely ridiculous to them.

So great is the thing that they think something is going on. Look at verse 7. They said to each other, let's cast lots. Somebody must be responsible for this calamity.

[21 : 33] So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, well who's responsible for making all the struggles? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What's your country? From what people are you?

And then we get to the next episode of fear. Again it's in response to something about God. The sailors are afraid when Jonah says where he comes from.

I am a Hebrew. I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. And they go, you idiot, what are you doing running away from that one?

If we'd known you were running away from that one, we'd have been stupid to take you on board.

You fool, what are you thinking about? Running away from the God who controls everything.

And then they ask him for the solution, verse 11. Well throw me overboard, he says. And they don't like that idea very much. With the little they know about God, they're a great deal more compassionate towards Jonah than Jonah, the prophet of the Lord, is compassionate towards the

people of Nineveh that he's been sent to.

[22 : 40] They're good guys, the sailors. They don't know much, but they don't have to respond well. They want to protect the person who's brought this terrible calamity on them. Notice what they do then, verse 14.

They cried out to the Lord. Please, Lord, don't let us die for taking this man's life. Don't hold us accountable for killing an innocent man. For you, O Lord, have done as you pleased.

Notice, notice, they're no longer crying out to their gods. That's what they were doing in verse 5. They are talking to the Lord, to Jonah's God, calling him by name.

And then we get their third bout of fear, verse 15. Do you see the pattern?

Jonah knows the Lord and runs away and is totally fearless in doing that. But the word of the Lord cannot be escaped.

[23 : 48] And Jonah, the uncompassionate, unwilling, distant, disengaged, the careless, the speaker who doesn't want to speak to foreigners, is used by God to speak to foreigners in such a way that they end up doing what he don't.

He doesn't fear the Lord and they do. Do you see? It's a wonderful story. He doesn't fear God. They do. He won't serve God, but they end up making their vows to the Lord.

This chapter is about the word of the Lord and its relentless progress. The true God is supremely powerful, and he wants pagans to know him, and even a prophet bent on oblivion can't stop that from happening.

God uses the totally unwilling prophet to do his will. Now, folks, what do we make of a chapter like this? Well, it's interesting, certainly, and enormously dramatic, and full of action.

Two things, two big things. The true God is supremely powerful, and the true God is wonderfully merciful. Why did the people back home in Israel need to see act one of this drama?

[25 : 06] Well, I think first for attitude reasons. I remember if you were here last time, we said that Jonah in this book is a bit like a little Israel. Israel, just as Jonah has attitude issues, so Israel back home has attitude issues.

Just as Jonah was meant to be a prophet of the Lord, so Israel as a nation is meant to be the Lord's servant. Just as Jonah was meant to be God's messenger to Israel, so Israel was supposed to act as God's representative in the world, a light to the nations.

But Israel had long since abandoned that role. What ruled in Israel back home? An inward looking, nationalist, self-seeking mindset, focused on national advancement, trusting in political power broking to make that happen, rather than being a light to the nations and trusting God's power to protect her in that role.

So what does an Israelite reader back home presented with in this chapter? On the one hand, a rather horrid story of a much privileged and much used prophet who is angrily freeing from his God-given role, and on the other hand, a very strong reminder of the greatness of God's power. He rules everything, and of the scope of God's mercy. He extends it to his enemies, to godless people. Jonah is a little bit like Israel.

[26 : 42] back home, there are big attitude issues. And the God in the mind of Jonah and of Israel is a rather small God with a very small circle of love.

Sometimes God's people have attitude issues. Hate him extending his kindness to others. Hate him making himself known to the world.

Either the way he's doing it or the people he's doing it to. Back when we were back in Nottingham working in a church, we had a friend working in a church nearby, and that church experienced significant growth over a couple of years.

And with that growth, great opposition from the people who'd been there for a long time. A friend of ours who attended that church said she was approached in church one Sunday by a person who'd been in the church for a long time, who said with venom, I wish you people would go away, and we could go back to being like what we were like before.

It is very easy for people who have the name of God's people to lose the plot about God's plan in the world. God wants to use his people, not merely bless them.

[28 : 03] He's got work for us to do in the world. So there are attitude issues back home, but I think there are also perplexity issues. Back home, things have been going well, and Jonah has been in the action, and suddenly he's told to do something different.

And that's a reality that needs to be faced. This is not a simple world in which God's good purposes are always easy to see or understand or like.

sometimes going with God's plans is very uncomfortable. It was very uncomfortable for Jonah. I imagine that thinking about going to Nineveh was a lot less comfortable than thinking about being back home.

And before we think condemnatory thoughts about Jonah or others who find themselves angry with God, we will find by the end of the book how very patient God is with Jonah, very patient.

This is not a simple world in which God's good purposes are always easy to discern or like or take on board for yourself. And here is so often the Bible is very realistic about life and about what we're like.

[29 : 18] So if you are struggling with God's purposes in your own life at the moment, how refreshing it is to know that this story is in the Bible. Here is a thoroughly angry man who God gives a lot of time to.

Not so that he can remain angry, but so that he can understand, God patiently shows mercy to this person. The true God is wonderfully powerful and wonderfully merciful.

And though at this point in the story, Jonah is horrid, I assume that by the end, and the reason we have this story, is that he changes his mind and comes to embrace God's plans.

God's plans. Now our time is nearly gone, but I'd like to flip you over to the New Testament, please, and to Mark chapter 4. And to a passage which for all its differences, and they are enormous, has massive reminders of Jonah chapter 1.

Mark chapter 4, verse 35. See if you can spot the similarities. They must be deliberate, I think, to Jonah chapter 1. Verse 35, Mark chapter 4.

[30 : 36] That day when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, let's get over to the other side. Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along just as he was in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat so that it was nearly swamped.

Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, teacher, don't you care if we drown?

He got up, rebuked the wind, said to the waves, quiet, be still. Then the wind died down, and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?

They were terrified and asked each other, who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him.

Spot the similarities? They are really significant, aren't they?

Like Jonah in the boat, Jesus is inexplicably asleep. Why? It's not an expression of carelessness, but it's very like him.

[31 : 38] Like the sailors in Jonah chapter 1, the disciples are terrified that they're going to drown and wake him up. Don't you care? Just like the sailors in Jonah 1? Just as in Jonah chapter 1, the sea suddenly becomes calm.

Not because of the one in the boat being thrown into the sea, but because he just speaks a word and it becomes calm. Just as in Jonah chapter 1, when the sea becomes calm, they are terrified. Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him? seems to me fairly obvious that here Jesus is being compared and contrasted to Jonah in Jonah chapter 1.

Why? Well, just as Israel was a failure as like to the nations, and Jonah was an imperfect servant in the surface of God, here we have one who, in sharp contrast, is anything but reluctant.

Supremely powerful. He speaks a word, and the inanimate world obeys his words. And in the passages immediately afterwards, we also have him speaking a word, and supernatural evil, and sickness, and death in a row are all subservient to his word.

[33 : 12] He is not reluctant. He is very powerful. He doesn't care about the discomfort of going to Nineveh and preaching to them.

He embraces for himself the discomfort of coming from heaven to a sinful world to save it, to die for it. How much more should we trust his power and compassion?

And how much more should we long to align ourselves with his generous plans in the world? Let's pray together.

Father, we acknowledge that often we find life in this world difficult, perplexing.

We find ourselves anxious and unsettled by the things we see in the world, so many of which seem to point to your lack of control.

[34 : 31] We find ourselves struggling with our own motives and our own small understanding. And therefore, we find ourselves often in two minds about serving you.

But we thank you that you've sent to our world one greater than Jonah. Supremely powerful words that conquer the inanimate world and evil and sickness and death.

One who is absolutely embracing of the difficulties of the work that you gave him to do.

And we pray that you would help us to trust in his power. And we pray that you would help us to share his concerns.

Hear our prayer, for we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Guys, we stand in my Church'sises.