

Jonah 1

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[0 : 0 0] 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. 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.

[0 : 5 6] 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 you to make the sea calm down for us?

Pick me up and throw me into the sea, he replied, and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you. Instead, the men did their best to row 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 the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

[2 : 0 7] Thanks, Aileen, very much. And we're just going to turn now as well to page 384 in the Church Bibles. It's 2 Kings chapter 14. So 2 Kings chapter 14.

In the fifteenth year of Amaziah, son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam, son of Jehoash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and he reigned for forty-one years.

He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-Hepah.

The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering. There was no one to help them. And since the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam, son of Jehoash.

As for the other events of Jeroboam's reign, all he did, and his military achievements, including how he recovered for Israel both Damascus and Hamath, which had belonged to Judah, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?

[3 : 35] Jeroboam rested with his ancestors, the kings of Israel, and Zechariah, his son, succeeded him as king. Good. Thanks very much.

Good evening, everyone. Let's pray as we come to God's word. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your words. We thank you for the gift of your spirit.

And we pray now that you would please draw near to us and be our teacher. Plant your word deep into our hearts and minds so that we might respond rightly to you, our creator and redeemer.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Okay, everyone. I would like you to complete this phrase all together now. Jonah and the?

Fish whale. Okay, fish whale. Good. Excellent. There isn't, I don't think there's a person in the room who didn't say something at that point to do with a large sea creature. Everyone knows something about this story.

[4 : 39] In fact, I imagine that if you went out of the church building after the service this evening and grabbed the first person you could and asked them to complete that phrase, they could complete that phrase nine times out of ten.

It's one of the best known stories in the whole of the Bible. A huge proportion of the population of this country knows that Jonah had a major life event in relation to a large sea creature.

For those of us who know the story a little better, it seems a pretty straightforward story. You can summarize it ever so briefly.

Grumpy prophet. Does not like foreigners. Told to go and preach to foreigners. Won't go. Goes to sea instead.

Big storm. Thrown into sea. Swallowed by fish. Vomited up by fish. Told to go to foreigners again. This time, goes to foreigners.

[5 : 38] Preaches to foreigners. Foreigners respond. Prophet. Very angry. Take home lesson. Bad man. Don't be like him.

That's what you learned in Sunday school, isn't it? If you learned it in Sunday school. Bad man. Don't be like him. What a nasty man. Simple story. What is there to understand?

Why spend five Sunday evenings on a story as straightforward as this one, you might think. Well, let me say that for me, this has, over the last few years, been one of the most perplexing books in the Bible.

And a great deal deeper than just bad man, don't be like him. Not least because the Lord Jesus likens his ministry to the ministry of Jonah.

In Luke chapter 11, Jesus says this. This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.

[6 : 38] For as Jonah was a sign for the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be for this generation. In some ways, says Jesus, Jonah is a very significant person, and I'm following in his footsteps.

Now, there's a surprise. Have you ever heard anyone say, Jonah, he's a bit like Jesus, isn't he? Well, according to Jesus, that's right. This is a really intriguing book and seriously worth five Sunday evenings.

We're going to, this evening, to do a kind of introduction, a kind of taster menu of the book of Jonah to whet the appetite before we dive into the drama at full tilt next week.

This evening, we're going to do two things. And the first thing we want to do this evening is to introduce ourselves very briefly to the story and think about just how unusual it is.

This is an exceptionally unusual story. And Jonah is an exceptionally unusual prophet of all the prophets in the Bible. Think about it for a moment.

[7 : 46] Let me say three things in relation to that. First, unlike most prophets in the Bible, Jonah's words are very few indeed.

It's a prophetic book, but there are hardly any prophetic words in it. Turn just a few pages back over Obadiah to the book of Amos. Amos was a prophet at the time of Jonah in the same place that Jonah was a prophet.

Look how the book of Amos starts, back on page 917. The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Decoah, the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam, son of Jehoash, was king of Israel.

He said, The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem. The pastures of the shepherds dry up. The top of Carmel withers. We're straight into his words, and the whole of the rest of the book is the words of the prophet.

In sharp contrast, turn over to Jonah chapter 3. What do we get of Jonah's preaching in this book? Jonah chapter 3, verse 4.

[8 : 57] This is what we get. 40 more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown. That's it. That's all we get. What kind of sermon is that?

Jonah's words are few. Second, unlike most prophets in the Bible, Jonah's motives are seriously unclear.

In a way, the book is about the story of Jonah himself. It's all about him and what happens to him. In another way, Jonah as a personality is strangely out of focus for much of the book.

He gets plenty of space, but not much depth. Let me look at one example. Look at chapter 1, verses 2 and 3. In verse 2, God tells him what to do.

In verse 3, we're told, Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. We're told what he hears and we're told what he does, but we're not told why.

[10 : 04] We're not told what he thought or what he felt or why he did what he did. We have to wait all the way until chapter 4 for any kind of explanation for why Jonah did what he did in chapter 1.

Look at chapter 4, verse 2. He prayed to the Lord, Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to full stall by fleeing to Tarshish.

Only here do we get some kind of explanation for why Jonah did what Jonah has been doing all book. And that's pretty odd given that the story seems to revolve around him and why he did what he did.

Jonah's motives are unclear. What we do discover about him by the end of the book is that he is immensely angry. That's the third surprising thing about this prophet.

Unlike most of the prophets in the Bible, Jonah is immensely angry at God. His anger is overwhelming. Look at chapter 4, verse 1.

[11 : 11] To Jonah, this seemed very wrong and he became angry. In fact, he is in a fuming rage in chapter 4.

Sulking and stropping. Being in a fuming rage about God is not typical of the prophets in the Bible. Jonah is one of the angriest men in the Bible.

I wonder if you're familiar with Roger Hargreaves' Mr. Men. You know, Mr. Tickle, Mr. Topsy-Turvy, Mr. Greedy, Mr. Messy. They're all rather the same than Mr. Men books because of their greediness or tickliness or topsy-turviness.

Things happen to them. Well, Jonah is the Mr. Angry of the Bible. The angriest man in the Bible, I think. He describes himself in chapter 4 as being angry enough to die.

He's that angry. And you can see then why people read this book and say, nasty man, doesn't like foreigners, don't be like him. except when you eventually get to looking at why he's angry, it's kind of difficult to pin down.

[12 : 20] Why precisely is he so furious with God and the fact that God has been kind to the people of Nineveh? People usually assume it's because in some way he has a passionate, personal hatred for the people of Nineveh.

And yet at no point in this story or indeed anywhere else in the Bible are we told why he personally should have that degree of hatred against those people.

His anger is front and center in this book. But exactly why he's angry? That's not quite so clear. This is a very unusual book then.

And Jonah is a very unusual prophet. For the second part of this evening, what we're going to do is something that's rarely done with this book. We're going to think about who the book was written for.

What is this book supposed to do? Well, despite its differences from, say, Amos, this book was written, like the other prophetic books, for God's people.

[13 : 26] This is not a timeless story. It's addressed to a particular audience in a particular place at a particular time. And the place and time are very much in Jonah's mind.

Look at chapter 4, verse 2 again. He prayed to the Lord. Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home?

Back home, when Jonah heard God's command, he hated it. And in chapter 4, he is still thinking about that time back home when he heard God's word and hated it and wanted to do something else.

What was going on back home when Jonah heard God's word? And when we ask that question, we get what, for many of us, may be a real surprise.

Jonah already had a big job back home, a God-given job. A successful job. So let's introduce ourselves to the situation back home.

[14 : 32] Please turn to 2 Kings chapter 14, that passage that was read a little bit earlier on. 2 Kings chapter 14, page 384.

Now, folks, we need a bit of history at this point. I don't know how you are with history. I managed to get all the way through secondary school, all the way through, without doing any history, which, in retrospect, is absolutely scandalous.

At the time, I have to say, it did not feel like a great loss to me, because up to that point, history lessons I had found extremely boring. The word history may take you back, also, to slightly tedious and rather irrelevant history lessons at school.

It may suggest things distant and irrelevant a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Those kinds of things. In fact, it is enormously reassuring that history is essential in the Bible.

You see, God is not distant in any way from human affairs. not in any way. He has acted in history, in lives, in nations, to make himself known to people.

[15 : 48] And when God urges us to trust him and depend on him and obey him, as he absolutely does urge us, he does not mean us to trust in the vague spiritual insights of some private guru somewhere, or to live our lives in accordance with a fairy tale that someone's made up, or to believe some human traditional myth which we might find personally enlightening, he means us to trust him on the basis of how he has really interacted with people in situations in history.

That is tremendously reassuring. Whether you're just checking out Christianity for the first time here this evening, or whether you've been a Christian for absolutely ages, we are not engaged in the art of self-persuasion here, building our own story to make sense of the world.

No, God has stepped into the world repeatedly, historically, to make himself known. And that history is absolutely crucial for understanding the book of Jonah.

Where are we in 2 Kings 14? Where are we? Well, we're in the mid-8th century BC. the mid-700s BC.

We are in what is now Palestine, the ancient land of Canaan. We are with the people of Israel, a nation to whom God has repeatedly revealed himself in special ways, rescuing them through Moses from slavery in Egypt, taking them to the land of Canaan where they've now been for 600 or 700 years.

[17 : 30] Let me mention five things briefly about the historical situation as we meet it in 2 Kings chapter 14. First, this has been a checkered history.

Verse 23, in the 15th year of Amaziah, son of Jehoash, king of Judah, Jeroboam, son of Jehoash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria.

At its height under the king Solomon some 200 years before, the great kingdom of Israel was the great kingdom of the region, hugely powerful, with far-reaching influence, but no longer.

After his death, Solomon's kingdom was divided into two parts, a large northern part called Israel, capital city Samaria, and a small southern part, Judah, capital city Jerusalem.

Israel, the northern part, had had a series of really dreadful kings. Unfaithful to God, driven by desire for political power, incredibly unstable, Jeroboam II, who we meet here, was the 14th king in 150 years.

[18 : 47] A checkered history indeed, but surprisingly, unexpectedly really, the second thing we learn here is that Jeroboam's reign was very prosperous.

Verse 23, he reigned for 41 years. His reign was a period of political and military success. Look at verse 25.

He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea. Or verse 28, as for the other events of Jeroboam's reign, all he did and his military achievements, including how he recovered for Israel both Damascus and Hamath, which had belonged to Judah, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?

Very significant time of military conquest and advance. He was also economically very successful. If you read the books of Amos and Hosea, Jonah's contemporaries in the northern kingdom, it is clear that this was a period of great material prosperity and for some of enormous wealth.

41 years, the most prosperous period the northern kingdom ever knew. Why was this? Was it because Jeroboam the king had learned the lessons of history and turned back from power-broking and back to trust in God?

[20 : 14] It was not for that reason. 4, verse 24, look at 24, Jeroboam did evil in the eyes of the Lord and of course his people did too.

Let's just pause for a moment. Let me flag up the really uncomfortable truth that a nation may prosper massively and experience huge security and life be in the main very comfortable and yet the designation evil be entirely appropriate.

That's worth reflecting on, isn't it? Most of us live with a degree of health and material prosperity that our grandparents could never have dreamed of.

And despite two world wars in the last century affecting this nation significantly, as a nation the United Kingdom sits on the end of a 200 plus year period of relative national stability and international influence of massive proportions.

numerically we are small on the world stage we have had huge impact. We are not used as a nation to thinking of ourselves as being among the world's losers, the world's unentitled people.

[21 : 51] In very many measurable ways Britain has prospered historically. Why have we prospered? How would you answer that question?

I think it's fair to say that our self-assessment as a nation is pretty positive at present. Schools are now required to promote British values in the classroom.

Four things are mentioned. Democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith.

That is a contemporary assessment of what makes Britain what it is and what has made Britain what it is historically. It is a very positive and upbeat assessment.

And I guess it's true that nations that are prospering will usually assess themselves very positively. Yet for Israel, a very prosperous nation at this point, the accurate assessment of that question had to include the idea she prospered despite being evil in the eyes of the Lord.

[23 : 16] That's an idea that any prosperous nation ought to reflect on. A checkered history, an unexpectedly prosperous reign.

So why did she prosper? Well, because third, we meet here a compassionate God. Why were the boundaries restored? Verse 26, because the Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering.

There was no one to help them. And since the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam, the son of Jehoash. This is how things had been in the northern kingdom.

They were on the downward slide as a nation. Before Jeroboam II, it had become really bad. And that downward slide continued after his reign.

Twenty years after Jeroboam's death, the nation was completely obliterated by the Assyrian armies coming from the northeast. That happened because of Israel's evil rejection of God's loving rule.

[24 : 27] However, at this point in the story, verse 27, the final end of the northern kingdom has not yet been decreed by God. And God, verse 26, is being very compassionate to these people.

That's why they prospered. And that's the only reason they prospered. God was kind to them. Unexpectedly, undeservedly. A checkered history, a prosperous reign, a very compassionate God.

Fourth, we meet here a successful prophet. How did God's compassion work itself into the life of these people? Verse 25 again. Look at verse 25 please. Jeroboam was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hefer.

Jonah was the one who directed Jeroboam's God given success. He was the spiritual architect of the good things that happened in Israel under Jeroboam's reign.

Unlike his contemporaries, Amos and Ahosea, Jonah seems to have been inside the political institution helping to further the work of the king, a God given role.

[25 : 47] But it must have been, I imagine, in some respects a positive experience, don't you think? He was used by God massively. And we're told that in some ways national life was going better as a result of his proclamation to the king.

Imagine that. Imagine the satisfaction. When your nation has been on the downward slope, imagine the satisfaction of seeing your nation blessed by God through your ministry to the king.

Now folks, we need to keep that situation in mind as we go through the book of Jonah. He has come from success back home. I wonder how the mission to Nineveh looked to him in comparison with that.

A checkered history, a prosperous reign, a compassionate God, a successful prophet. However, there is one more thing, one crucial thing, mentioned in this passage that is highly relevant to the book of Jonah.

And it's in verse 24. people. When my children were small, we read through the book of two kings at one point. It's a very repetitive book in a number of ways, especially when you get to the kings of Israel, because they're pretty much like one another.

[27 : 12] And in the end, we had this kind of pantomime type dialogue thing going with statement and chorus and that kind of thing. And it went a bit like this.

Just look at verse 23 and you'll get the feel of how it went. I would say, in the twelfth year of so and so, king of Judah, thingamibob, son of Ujumaflit, became king over Israel in Samaria, and he did.

And the children would go, evil! Because that's what all the kings of Israel do. They do evil in the eyes of the Lord. And then I would continue. And he did not and they would say in chorus, repent of any of the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat.

Because that's what all the kings of Israel don't do. They do do evil and they don't repent of any of the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat. All of them do that. The fifth thing we find here in this passage is an unrepented of sin.

Crucial question, what are the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat? They're mentioned again and again in two kings. What are they? Well, Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, Jeroboam the first, was the first king over the northern kingdom.

[28 : 32] The first one. What did he do that was so problematic for the later history of the people of Israel? Well, the problem that the northern kings had was that the temple of Jerusalem, where the people had to go to worship God, the temple of God was in Jerusalem and that was down south in the southern kingdom.

So what do you do if you're a king of the northern kingdom? You try and prevent people from going down there. It's not going to do well to foster relationships between the two kingdoms.

What did Jeroboam do? Jeroboam the first. Answer, he built shrines. Two of them. One at the top end of the northern kingdom and one at the bottom end of the northern kingdom.

And in the shrines, 1 Kings chapter 12, he put golden calves to represent God to the people of Israel.

Why is it a bad idea to install golden calves at the northern southern ends of your kingdom? Because for two reasons. One, God has told his people not to build images to represent him.

[29 : 44] He cannot be accurately represented with a visual image because he's not created. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Israel had a long history with golden calves.

Right back at the start of their national life, just after the rescue from Egypt, Israel built a golden calf to represent God, their rescuer.

That event nearly destroyed the whole relationship between God and Israel right at the beginning. Jeroboam I's sin was absolutely catastrophic.

He repeated that golden calf thing. Politically expedient, so he thought, but absolutely catastrophic for the nation spiritually. And because the northern kings were always more interested in power than they were in truth, not one of them turned away from that great national sin.

150 years later on, they're still doing it. And back home, as Jonah is sent elsewhere, they still have not turned away from that sin.

[30 : 58] And as we will find when we get to chapter 4, Jonah knows only too well that they haven't turned away from that sin. Let me summarize then.

back home, a nation with a checkered history, an unexpectedly prosperous reign, because God has been very compassionate to them.

A very successful prophetic ministry for Jonah, and yet an unrepented of national sin of massive proportions. Now let's gather up those ideas and return briefly to Jonah chapter 1.

Go back to Jonah chapter 1 please. Let's begin to think about how this drama, this extraordinary book, might connect with us here and now.

Let me mention just two things about the drama of the book of Jonah. The audience and the anger. First, let's think about the audience. Who is this book written for?

[32 : 04] Well, I've already said, like all the other prophetic books, for the people of Israel. A very privileged people. A people who have experienced God's compassion undeservedly throughout their history, and yet have not repented of their national sin.

What is this book about? Well, it's about a very privileged prophet who himself in this story experiences God's compassion quite undeservedly, and yet at the end of the book is very unwilling to repent of his anger.

Do you see the comparison? Jonah is like a little Israel. In very significant ways, his attitudes reflect the attitudes of his people back home.

Why do you think this book got into the Bible? Well, I imagine it came from Jonah. He's the only one, as far as we know, who went to Nineveh to preach. And I imagine it got to the Bible because between the end of the book, when he's questioned about his anger, he changed his mind.

And I imagine he wrote this story down because he recognized that his people back home needed to learn from his story. Needed to respond as he had to God's challenge.

[33 : 44] So let me just observe that those who experience, as a result of God's compassion, peace, plenty, privilege, can very easily come to believe that peace and plenty and privilege are an entitlement in life.

Can easily come to believe that urgent obedience to God's word is no longer required.

That was Israel back home. And that is Jonah in this story. That's exactly what the audience of this drama had done.

And this book was written for them. That's the audience. Now let's consider the anger. Why is Jonah so angry?

When we get to chapter four, his anger is right in the middle of the story. Twice God asks him, is it right for you to be angry? Is it right for you to be angry?

[34 : 59] And that begs the question, of course, why is Jonah angry? The background presents us with three possibilities. One, the usual one. He's angry because of what God's command means for the people of Nineveh.

Perhaps he does hate them so much that he'd rather be dead than give them the opportunity to repent. Why might that be so? Well, 20 years after Jeroboam's death, it's the Assyrians, people from Nineveh, who destroy the northern kingdom.

There are reasons to fear and dislike the people of Nineveh, but there are other possibilities. Perhaps he's angry about God because of what God's command means for Israel back home.

You see, Jonah has been doing restoration work back home. It's been going well. He knows only too well that there is a big unrepented of sin still running back home.

What does it mean then that God is now telling him to go and do something else somewhere else? Might that mean that Israel's opportunity to turn around is disappearing?

[36 : 13] Might it mean that Israel is about to lose her privileged position in the world? Now, that might make him angry, don't you think? Or it might be because Jonah is worried, angry about what God's command means for him personally.

He, of course, is the spiritual architect of the blessing to his nation. He's being told to go somewhere else now, something far less attractive than being at home. Imagine being told to go to Nineveh.

That might mean for him a great deal of discomfort and a great deal of personal loss. Might it also mean that his work back home has, in fact, been in vain and that the nation is not going to be turned round?

That might indeed make him angry, mightn't it? From time to time, God does things that make his people really angry.

This may not happen to you yet in life. Chances are it will at some point. God will do something in your life, in your family, in your church, in your ministry, in your nation.

[37 : 34] Something big will happen involving either benefit for other people that you think is outrageous or loss for you that you think is outrageous.

If you're in that position now, it's a painful position to be in. This is a book to meditate on. God is very patient with Jonah, very patient.

But he does want him to change. If you're not yet in that position, this is a book to prepare yourself with. God is hugely patient with Jonah, but he asks him gently, repeatedly, is it right for you to be angry?

Is that the right response to me? And to my generosity? Let's pray together. But the Lord replied, is it right for you to be angry?

We pray, Heavenly Father, that as we explore this book over the next few weeks, you would please speak to us. We thank you for what it teaches about you, about how you work in the world, about your kindness and generosity.

[39 : 00] We thank you for your kindness and generosity. We thank you for its wonderful realism. We thank you that there is a really angry man in the Bible.

And we thank you for your patience with him. Please would you teach us.

We pray that if we've grown complacent, developed a sense of entitlement because of your goodness to us, you would wake us up.

We pray that if we find ourselves angry at what you've done, you would give us perspective. We're very grateful, Heavenly Father, for the good things that you've poured into our lives and the many good things we experience as a result of national prosperity here.

But we pray that you would help us to assess ourselves and our nation rightly. Give us eyes to see how you see things.

[40 : 15] We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.