

Jonah 1

'No Ordinary God'

The port city of Joppa

The city of Tel Aviv lies on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, thirty miles from Jerusalem.

And within this modern city lies the ruins of a more ancient city – the ancient seaport of Joppa.

Joppa is famous for many things in history.

It is the port where Solomon landed his great cedars from Lebanon.

It is where the Greeks fostered their legend of Andromeda.

According to them, Joppa is the location of the rock from which Perseus rescued Andromeda from the sea monster.

Joppa was where Richard the Lion-hearted built his citadel in the days of the crusades.

It is the place through which Napoleon passed.

And it is the location from which General Allenby routed the Turks in 1917.

Joppa is a city with a mysterious and romantic past.

And Joppa is a city that features in two very important stories in the Bible.

In Acts 9 and 10 it is the city in which the apostle Peter received his call by God to go and speak to the Gentiles.

It was from this city that Peter reluctantly went to meet with Cornelius and the first Gentile Christians were born.

Joppa also features in another place in the Bible.

The book of Jonah tells us that it was from Joppa that another reluctant missionary was to depart in order to tell some other Gentiles to listen to God and repent.

In these next four weeks we are going to be taking a look at the book of Jonah.

It is a great book with a great story that raises great Biblical themes.

So, let's turn to the book of Jonah.

Setting the scene

Nineveh

Now, because this is the first talk, we need to do a bit of background research and set the scene for the story.

The first thing I need to do is to explain a bit about Nineveh.

Nineveh is very important in the book of Jonah.

And it is very important in the Old Testament as a whole.

You see, in the Bible the city of Nineveh represents an idea.

It represents everything that is big,

everything that is bad,

and everything that is an intolerable affront to God.

Nineveh is a great and evil city.

It is a godless place.

The prophetic call

The second thing I need to do is to explain a bit about the way God calls his prophets in the Old Testament.

You see, there is a distinct pattern.

You can see this pattern with prophets such as Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

And the pattern is this.

- God calls the prophet out of their daily routine to do a great and difficult task.
- The prophet argues with God and disputes with him.
- But eventually the prophet agrees that they will go.

The prophet Jonah is one of the great exceptions of the Bible.

Look at Jonah 1.1-4.

God calls Jonah to preach his word.

Jonah does not argue.

Jonah does not dispute.

And Jonah does not go.

Instead he flees from the presence and the command of God.

Tarshish

The third thing I need to explain is the city of Tarshish.

It is mentioned in Jonah 1:3.

Now we don't know much about Tarshish from the Bible or from other historical documents.

However, what we do know is this...

- Tarshish was another sea port (Psalm 48:7; Isaiah 23:1).
- It is linked with Libya and Greece and other distant lands where the God's fame and glory are not known (Isaiah 66:19).

In other words, if you want to flee from God then Tarshish is the place to go.

It is far away.

And God is not known or honoured there.

Jonah at sea

So, there we have the background to this book of the Bible.

With these bits of background in mind, let's return to chapter 1.

Let's look at the detail of the story.

And as we do, I want you to remember that Jonah is a Jew.

And Jews are notorious landlubbers.

Apart from a few people who were sailors or fishermen, most Jews hated the sea.

For them the sea was a place of dark sea monsters.

It was a place where dark, chaotic, out-of-control waves heaved and rolled.

But for Jonah travelling westward on the dark and dangerous sea was a much better option than travelling in the opposite direction toward Nineveh.

Verse 4 tells us that being on the sea was better than being in the presence of the Lord.

But as Jonah flees, God acts.

As he had spoken his word to Jonah, he now chases him with his actions.

Verse 4 tells us that God hurls a great wind upon the sea.

A mighty tempest breaks forth and the ship threatens to break up.

Verse 5 introduces us to the sailors or mariners.

Now the mariners are outsiders.

They are experienced sailors, but they are gentiles.

They know nothing of he who walks upon the surface of the deep.

They don't know Jonah's God, the Lord.

And they don't know that Jonah is fleeing from this God.

But as their ship is tossed and shaken, verse 5 tells us that they shake with fear and turn to prayer.

They call upon every god in an attempt to find the one responsible.

At the same time they do the wise and practical thing.

They lighten the ship's load.

Their precious cargo is thrown overboard in an attempt to preserve their lives.

In the second half of the verse the camera pans back to Jonah.

He still refuses to respond.

He goes down into the hold of the ship.

He had previously closed his ears to God's word.

Now he shuts his eyes to God's actions.

He sleeps.

Perhaps he feels as though he has effectively escaped.

God and his insistence at preaching has been left behind.

Nineveh has been left behind.

All is secure.

In the midst of the churning sea, he finds some peace.

But the mariners search on.

And eventually they find Jonah—asleep!

They are absolutely dumbfounded.

Listen to the captain's words in verse 6:

What do you mean, you sleeper?

In other words,

What are you doing asleep?

Arise!

Call on your God.

Maybe, just maybe your God will do something none of our gods have been able to do.

Maybe your god will give a thought to us so that we may not perish.

Underneath all of these questions is the real question for which they are seeking an answer:

Who is this God we are dealing with?

Why is he doing this to us?

And what has made this God so angry?

Jonah is now awake.

They urge him to join with them in their search for the right God to contact and placate.

Verse 7 tells us that in this search they cast lots.

The lot falls to Jonah.

He who speaks powerful words controls the winds and the waves.

And he who controls the wind and the waves has no problem controlling the casting of lots.

Now the mariners have found the person responsible.

They begin to interrogate Jonah.

They ply him for answers.

Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us.

What is your occupation?

Where do you come from?

What is your country?

Of what people are you?

Underneath all of these questions are the real questions:

Who is this God we are dealing with?

Why is he doing this to us?

And what have you done to make your God this angry?

And Jonah caves in.

The truth finally comes to the surface.

Listen to him in verse 9:

I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven.

I fear the Lord.

I fear the Lord, the God of heaven.

I fear the Lord, the one who made the heavens and the dry land.

The men are horrified for they have seen the power of this God.

These experienced sailors have done everything.

They have unsuccessfully battled to overcome him in the force of the wind and the waves.

They know that the God they are dealing with is not some backyard deity or some tame idol.

The increasingly heaving seas bear witness to him.

And so, in verse 11 they ask how they should respond to this God.

In verse 12 Jonah tells them that they should throw him overboard.

But they are not convinced.

Unlike Jonah who was willing to sleep when the mariners were in danger, they do their best to save him.

They row hard.

But verse 13 tells us that the sea grows more and more tempestuous.

Before long they are left with no choice.

They must get rid of Jonah.

And so they proceed in the appropriate manner.

They call upon the Lord, this foreign God.

They ask his understanding and favour.

They ask to him stop them making a mistake and prevent them from shedding innocent blood.

And then they act.

As agents of God's justice, they pick up the recalcitrant and hurl him into the sea.

And immediately the storm is switched off.

The sea returns to its normal state.

And the men realise that they have been in the hands of the real God.

Verse 16 tells us that they fear the Lord and offer sacrifices and make vows.

In the presence of the God of heaven and the Lord of the sea and the dry land they bow in worship.

What is this all about?

So, there is the story from two different perspectives.

Now let's turn and ask ourselves what this chapter is about.

Why is it here?

What is its purpose?

And what does God want us to learn from it?

Well, I think that clue to this is found in 9-10.

You see, I think that these verses are the key to unlocking the whole chapter.

Let me explain.

Did any of you notice that the word 'fear' or its related words appear 4 times in the chapter?

Look at verse 5: The mariners are 'afraid'

In verse 9: Jonah says that he 'fears' the Lord

In verse 10: The mariners are 'afraid' again

And then in verse 16: The mariners 'fear' the Lord exceedingly

Let's have another look at the two different parties in the story again.

This time, let's concentrate on what is said about their fear.

- Jonah

First, let's look at Jonah.

Jonah says in verse 9 that he 'fears' the Lord.

Now what exactly does this mean?

You see, this term 'fear the Lord' is a technical term in the Old Testament.

And 'fearing the Lord' in the OT normally means:

- respecting God
- revering God
- Submitting to God
- Trembling before God as God
- Giving God prominence
- And living as though God really was God.

And so people who 'feared God' in the OT normally expressed their fear of him by obeying him and serving him.

By yielding their lives up to him.

Now this chapter in Jonah tells us that Jonah can say the words okay.

But this chapter also tells us that they don't mean much to him.

No!

It seems as though the words are little more than a creed to him.

He can stand up and say it before these gentiles.

But he hardly lives it, does he?

He is hardly interested in the reality of it.

For when God speaks he runs.

When God acts he sleeps.

When God judges in Jonah 4, he can be found sulking.

You see, Jonah is God's person in the sense that he belongs to God.

But he is not God's person because of anything that he is.

Jonah is rescued at the end of the chapter, but not because he is a good, God fearing man.

Jonah is a man who knows the fear of God in his head.

He can recite it with his tongue.

And he reaps the benefits of being in God's company.

Jonah is a man who is happy to have the privileges of being among God's people.

But he is reluctant to exercise the responsibilities of being God's person.

He is hardly one who LIVES in the fear of God.

He is hardly one who lives like one who resides in the presence of God.

The mariners recognise this immediately.

And they are shocked at his ungodliness.

- The Mariners

Now let's have a closer look at the mariners and their fear.

As we do, remember that the mariners are outsiders.

They are gentiles, strangers to God and his purposes.

They have their own gods.

But look at what happens.

First, they face the elements as God controls them.

And what is their response?

They 'fear'.

And then they act.

They search for God behind the stormy elements.

Now look at verse 10.

They have tracked down the God responsible.

And hear of him from Jonah.

And we are told that they are exceedingly afraid of the consequences of what has happened.

Having glimpsed the reality of this God they are horrified at Jonah.

How could a worshipper of this great God be so trite about him?

How could one who says he fears the God of heaven, the one who made the sea and the dry land be lying asleep while he calls.

How could you run when he speaks?

How could you not stand in awe of his action?

Now take a look at verse 16 and the third reference to 'fear' in relation to the mariners.

We are told that these mariners 'fear the Lord exceedingly'.

They offer sacrifices.

And they make vows.

Where Jonah should have vowed obedience in response to God's call, these outsiders do so instead.

Now, let me just remind us all here that most of us have at some point been in the place of the mariners, haven't we?

Perhaps we could corporately stop and remember.

Go back across the years and bring into your memory the day you first felt the fear of God.

There are a number of you're here today who have experienced the fear of God like these mariners.

Dig into your hearts and remember.

Remember that day when you first discovered how lost you were.

Remember that time when you first became aware of God's great holiness and your great sinfulness.

Perhaps it was during a sermon.

Or while reading the scriptures.

Or when deep in prayer.

Or through some event that God brought about in his providence.

And through this mechanism you became aware of God in a way you never had before.

God caused you to look within yourself.

And when you did you discovered a terrifying truth.

You discovered the great evil that lurked within your heart.

You remembered your past with great shame and disgust.

And you knew that if God was God then he must inevitably punish such evil.

Fear began to take possession of your heart.

You knew that death was to be feared because it would mean meeting your maker.

But you knew death could not be lived knowing that you were so out of tune with the designs of your maker.

And if you are a Christian, then you know how God responded to you.

You know that he brought you the great news of Jesus.

And you know that as you heard the story you realised that this God-man died for you.

He died in your place.

He took the punishment that was due to you.

And as you took on this great news you discovered that there would be no hell for you, no abandonment by God.

You were redeemed in Christ.

And you feared the Lord exceedingly.

Before him you fell and gave your life.

The tragedy of Jonah 1

What it is

Friends, I want to close tonight's talk by pointing out to you the tragedy of Jonah here.

Can you see it?

Here is Jonah, a man who has all the benefits of being God's person.

But he ignores God.

On the other hand, the mariners are outsiders who respond how Jonah should.

Why it is a danger to us

But the tragedy of Jonah is also a danger for us.

You see, many of us are just like Jonah.

But we are even more culpable than Jonah.

For we have heard something far greater than Jonah ever heard.

We have seen something far greater than the upheaval of the created order.

We have heard God's great living word in Jesus.

He who is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

The great God, the creator of heaven and earth in human form.

And we have seen the upheaval in the heart of God as his Son dies in our place.

And yet we Christians often insult this God.

He urges us to read his word and know it and we run out of time.

He challenges us, and we flee from the threat.

We come to church and Bible study and treat his word with complacency.

We recite creeds about him and sing songs of his greatness and majesty.

But let's face it.

So often we sit in deep slumber.

Oblivious of his actions.

We shield ourselves from his challenges or utter self-justifications about them.

We shake off his word.

We have great privileges, but have often run from the responsibilities that go with those privileges.

How to avoid it

Well, friends, if this is you, then let me urge you to stop and take stock.

Think about the mariners and those outright pagans who hear about Jesus.

Think about their joy and enthusiasm and fear.

And remember how you too felt that fear, enthusiasm and joy.

And take a lesson from them.

Be shamed by them.

Bow again before the God of all the earth today.

Go back to the cross and stare at what it tells you about God and yourself.

God back to the scriptures and read them again.

And fear the God you meet there.

Love him.

And obey him.

Stop running, and live what you profess.

We have been given the greatest privilege a human being can possess.

We are in relationship with the living God, the creator of all.

Well, this God calls us to respond.

He calls upon us to reflect that privilege in responsible living.