

And the Raging Sea Grew Calm

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Date: 27 October 2024

Preacher: Simon Rehberg

[0 : 00] We're reading tonight, again from Jonah chapter one, we're working our way through the book of Jonah these next few weeks. Simon will be leading us in those.

So Jonah chapter one, page 774 in the church Bibles, and we will read the first 17 verses.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amitya, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for the evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish, so he paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid and each cried out to his God, and they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.

[1 : 03] But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had laid down and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, what do you mean you sleeper? Arise, call out to your God.

Perhaps the God will give a thought to us that we may not perish. And they said to one another, come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.

So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation and where do you come from?

What is your country and of what people are you? And he said to them, I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, what is this that you have done?

And the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord because he had told them.

Then they said to him, what shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us? For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.

[2 : 04] He said to them, pick me up and hurl me into the sea. Then the sea will quiet down for you. For I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.

Nevertheless the men rode hard to get back to dry land, but they could not. For the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the Lord, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life.

And lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you. So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from his raging.

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

This is God's word. Thank you, Lewis. That was great. It's really good to be here with you again tonight. It's the second sermon of this sermon series.

[3 : 04] We go through the book of Jonah, and we have talked about Jonah last week already. Last week was all about Jonah running away, and if last week was about Jonah running away, then this week is about God chasing after Jonah.

So last week we said that, like Jonah, we all run from God, and deep down in your heart, you know this. You know this is true. And this week we have read the rest of the story that we didn't go to last week.

And now we see that God is chasing after Jonah. Sin means running away from God. Grace means God running after you. So I've got a few things I want to point out today in this text, so we'll dive right in.

And the first thing I want to show you is that God chases Jonah even and is descend into death and chaos. Wow. What do I mean by that? So Jonah is running into death and chaos.

And what I mean by that is simply this. The point of the text in this chapter is to say that Jonah is descending into death. Why do I say this? The language, the original Hebrew hints at this.

[4 : 14] Okay. Jonah flees from the presence of the Lord. Now we learn in the Bible that the Lord is the God of life. He gives life. He is life himself.

So fleeing from the presence of the Lord is already a really bad sign. Right? That is hinting at death. So where does Jonah flee? He flees down to Joppa, and this word down comes up a few times in these verses. He flees down to Joppa, and then he goes down into a boat to Tarshish.

And that's the next thing. In the Old Testament, we read about ships to Tarshish or the ships off Tarshish two other times. In both times, the ships get wrecked. So that's not a good sign.

That hints at death as well. So this is all language of chaos, destruction, and it doesn't stop there. If you know your Bible well, you know that the sea is never a great sign.

[5 : 15] The sea in Jewish literature, in the Bible, the sea is always a synonym for chaos, for sin. So Jonah goes down into the boat on the sea.

And the reason why the sea is a sign for sin, death, and chaos is, I mean, we can see it now as well. Right? We look at the ocean, we see water, we see big waves.

We remember maybe the tsunami in Fukushima in 2011. There's destructive power in water. It's uncontrollable. It's the antithesis to creation.

It uncreates things. And so in the Bible, in the Old Testament, this theme is picked up and it makes the point that the sea is bad.

It's the unknown. It's dark. It's deep. We don't know what's there, right? And then Jonah continues to go even further down.

[6 : 13] He goes into the belly of the ship. The Hebrew word for that is interesting. The Hebrew word that describes the inner part of the ship, it's actually a word that can mean a lot of things.

It just describes the extremity of any given space, so a mountain range. Or for example, the far north or the far south or something really big, like the whole earth or the innermost, like in this verse.

And this word is used in two other places in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 32. And there it comes up in connection with Sheol.

And Sheol is a bit of a complicated thing that I can't really explain tonight because we don't have time, so if you're interested, ask Cori. I'll just say this.

It means something like the realms of death and darkness. So it's not a fast stretch to say that in this context, it's also revoking images of the underworld. So throughout this chapter, we have a motive of descent.

[7 : 16] Jonah goes down to Joppa, down into the boat, down into the inside of the boat, away from the presence of the Lord, on the sea, below deck, and there he falls asleep.

And the word for falling asleep in this verse, I know we look at a lot of Hebrew here, but this word is also unusual because it's not the normal word for sleep that is used elsewhere.

This is a kind of sleep that is induced by God, usually when God reveals himself to someone. Or again, it comes up in the context of death and destruction.

So all of this is pointing towards something. All of this is to say Jonah is fleeing from the presence of the Lord into death, the underworld, chaos, sin.

In other words, it shows the consequences of Jonah's action of fleeing. And yet, God is chasing after him. God is chasing Jonah to the end.

[8 : 16] How? And in the verse this last week, God is sending a great storm, which in the Bible is a sign of divine wrath. We read about this in the Psalms, in Amos, in Jeremiah.

And in Jeremiah, there's a very interesting passage, Jeremiah chapter 23, where God rebukes false prophets who refuse to warn sinners of impending judgment.

Now, does that ring a bell? A prophet who refuses to warn sinners of impending judgment? Let me read a few verses from Jeremiah 23.

It says this, For who among them has stood in the counsel of the Lord to see and to hear his word? Or who has paid attention to his word and listened? Behold, and now this is interesting, the storm of the Lord.

Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest, it will burst upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intense of his heart.

[9 : 14] In the latter days, you will understand it clearly. I did not send the prophets, yet they ran. I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied.

Jeremiah 23 here is aimed at false prophets who haven't received the word of God, and yet they ran to preach it. Now, in Jonah's case, it's the other way around.

Jonah has received the word, and then he ran, so he wouldn't preach it. Yet it is at the core the same thing.

It's a prophet not doing his duty. So in this chapter, we read that a judgment has fallen on Jonah. Yet one of the things we learn in Jonah is that judgment and salvation, they are part of the same thing.

Without judgment, there is nothing to be saved from. So this is what we see here in Jonah. And we see God saving through the storm, through judgment.

[10 : 20] We see God saving through the use of creation, through his sovereignty, because there's an irony going on in this chapter. Jonah is trying to get away from God, but everything he's using to try to get away from God turns against him.

So the boat is being thrown around by the wind and waves. The sea, the wind, even the people on the boat are used by God to bring Jonah back to the land, to his mission, and ultimately to Nineveh. And we can just press pause on this for a moment, because I thought this is interesting. Do you ever feel like God is speaking to you through nature, through a Bible verse, through other people? This is just a quick moment to say God communicates to you through his word, through the word preached, but also through conversations, through people in your life, and through the beauty of nature.

Okay, God is chasing after Jonah in this chapter. So even when Jonah decides to get as far away from God as he possibly could, God runs after him.

[11 : 34] And the beautiful thing in this chapter is that there's another group of people that God is saving at the same time. So let's look at the sailors.

This is the second point. True fear of the Lord. What does it mean to truly fear the Lord? The sailors, they're a man who don't know God.

Yet in this chapter, there are more pious than Jonah himself. What do I mean? In the beginning of the story, they're afraid of the storm. They fear the waves, they fear the storm, they think they'll die in verse five, and they each cry out to their own God.

Jonah at the same time, what does he do? He's asleep. They continue to struggle to fight for their lives. They continue to throw cargo overboard.

What is Jonah doing? He's asleep. In other words, the sailors are fighting to stay alive. Well it seems like Jonah has given himself over to death.

[12 : 32] And it's probably when the captain goes down into the belly of the ship, into the downstairs room in the ship, to find more cargo to throw overboard, that he sees Jonah lying down between all this stuff, and he wakes him up and he says, arise, cry out, which is another really interesting thing, because these exact two words are the words that God uses to tell Jonah to arise and cry out against Nineveh.

So Jonah must have felt that and would have been reminded of that. And the captain says, pray to your God, Jonah. That's what we all do. Does Jonah pray to his God?

No, Jonah doesn't. Does Jonah tell them why there is a storm? No, Jonah doesn't. Jonah is extremely unhelpful at this point. He's disobedient, he's stubborn, and he's actually okay with them just struggling for their lives in the storm.

And it's only when they cast lots that Jonah actually starts talking. And casting lots, if you didn't know, is a very typical thing for Israelites in the Old Testament to get a revelation of God's will. So again, we are reminded, the sailors, they are trying to stay alive. They are trying to find out what is going on while Jonah is doing nothing and is disobedient and reluctant.

[13 : 57] And then Jonah tells them, finally, he's a Hebrew. He fears the Lord, and he admits that he is fleeing from this God who made the heavens, the sea, and the dry land.

And that that's the reason for the storm. And the sailors, they can't believe it. I have a good friend, a really dear friend here in Edinburgh. Very strong Christian.

And he shared his testimony with me from the time before he was a Christian. And he told me, he was up to all sorts. I remember he told me his testimony.

He recalled his non-Christian friends. They were shocked at the stuff he did as a supposedly Christian man. He was stealing, cheating, gossiping more than all of the other guys.

And in my mind, I can just see him telling them about what he had done, and they go, you've done what? They're shocked. They say, you've done what have you done?

[14:54] You claim to believe in God, the Lord of the sea and earth, and you're saying that you ran away from this God? Are you out of your mind, Jonah? Do you see what's going on in this chapter?

Jonah says he fears the Lord, but he doesn't really fear the Lord. He doesn't really act like it. The sailors, they don't know God. They fear the storm because they don't know why the storm is there. But as soon as they find out that it's because Yahweh sent it, they fear the storm even more. In verse 10, it actually literally says they feared with great fear.

But then in verse 16, it has changed. It says they feared the Lord with great fear. There is an irony here because the sailors are actually much more pious than Jonah in this chapter.

The fear of them, it shifts from terror of the unknown to awestruck fear of Yahweh, the God of the land and the sea. And that's the appropriate reaction.

[15:55] What is Jonah doing? He says he fears the Lord, yet he runs away, he hides. He falls asleep. He does not reveal to the others that it's him who is the culprit.

And after the captain tells him to pray, he doesn't pray. Jonah is persistently disobedient. While the sailors seek for revelation, Jonah is running away from revelation.

When he says he fears God, it should make you laugh because it's ridiculous. Because he doesn't. That's the problem at heart here. It's a lack of fear of the Lord.

And you might be sitting here and you don't really understand what it means to fear the Lord and that's okay because we could fill hours trying to understand what it ultimately really means, but in this story we can see an aspect of it in the sailors.

One person defined it like this. One person said, a true fear of the Lord realizes that you can't run from God and the only option is to run to him. When you do, you find the embracing arms of a loving father.

[17:00] And I thought that was so helpful, this quote, because it fits our Jonah language so well. It's when you realize you can't run from God, the only option is to run to God.

And when you do, you find the embracing arms of a loving father. You see, fearing the Lord does not mean being scared of God in a way of seeing him as an abusive, evil, judging God who can't wait to destroy you and enjoys your suffering.

No, fearing the Lord means fearing the Almighty God. It's understanding that he is who he says he is and that he has come to save you.

To fear God means to realize that you can't and you shouldn't run away from him because in him you do find everything you've been searching for.

In this passage, as I said, we see the sailors fear shifting from the unknown, from the storm to Yahweh, the God who has revealed himself to them.

[18:02] The sailors, they're actually fearing God and they obey him and they pray to him. And at every point, they outshine Jonah.

So there's a contrast here between the sailors visible fear of God and the sailors, sorry, the sailors visible fear of God and Jonah's confessional fear of God.

He's just using empty words. So this is a question for us tonight, for you tonight. Do you merely confess your faith but you don't really live like it?

You don't really behave like you believe what you're saying? Have you ever maybe felt like Jonah that when you were asked about your faith, you said the right things and you knew you said the right things, but in your heart you weren't feeling it and in your life it wasn't visible?

Do you miss maybe perhaps you're like Jonah and you were a Christian at some point, you became a Christian and it felt so real and you felt what you believed but now it's not there anymore?

[19:10] Do you miss these times when you were a fresh Christian and you felt everything you believed so much more? Has your spiritual life perhaps dried up?

Is it maybe time to rethink your schedule and to set aside special time for spiritual disciplines? Do you pray, do you ask God for a heart of flesh when times are not as nice, when you're struggling, when it's a difficult season in your life?

Do you have Christian friends who inspire you, who challenge you? That's really, really helpful. I usually try to have two Christian friends who are alive, deep Christian friends and two who are not alive anymore.

What I mean by that is I'm good friends with Charles Spurgeon and Tim Keller. Now they don't really, I mean they tell me a lot but I can't communicate with them as well and I have another couple of really good Christian friends in my life who inspire and challenge me and who ask hard questions because people can tell if you mean what you say you believe or not.

So we have a responsibility to reflect God and Jesus and to live in a way that shows that we take Him seriously and that is to say that we do have a fear of the Lord.

[20 : 29] We want to be doers of the word, not simply hear us. But let's see how the story ends. Thirdly, I've called this a reluctant savior and I stole this from another preacher but that's fine.

After realizing that it's Jonah's fault and that he's running from God, they ask Jonah what they should do. And judging from the character of Jonah you would think he would just, I don't know, not lie but he wouldn't really cooperate.

But he says something unexpected. He tells them to hurl him, Jonah, overboard because he knows that the storm is there because of him.

But because the men in the boat, they're not keen on becoming murderers, they're decent men, they just try to row harder. And as the storm grows stronger and stronger, they understand, they realize they don't stand a chance.

So they take Jonah and like the cargo before they fling him overboard. And again in the Hebrew, this verb comes up three times in this chapter, God flings the wind on them, they fling the cargo overboard and now they fling Jonah overboard because Jonah is a reluctant prophet and he's become useless.

[21 : 49] He's just extra weight that is of no other help. Now praise be to God that God can even use a reluctant prophet, someone who is useless, like Jonah in this case, because what is happening here?

Is Jonah okay to die for the sailors? Does he change his minds? Is Jonah all of a sudden had just a revelation and knows it's the right thing to do?

Is he a good guy all of a sudden? Or is he maybe trying to manipulate God? Is he saying, okay, if I die, if they throw me in, then I don't have to go to Nineveh, right?

And that God won't save those guys and then, well, I'm happy to die rather than go to Nineveh.

Might be, perhaps. But we don't know, maybe somewhere in between is the truth, we don't know if he tried to manipulate God's judgment or salvation.

It could be. The point is this, point of the whole book is this, neither God's judgment nor God's salvation is subject to human manipulation.

[22 : 59] In other words, we can't change what God has decided to do. So Jonah, whatever his motives are, he gets thrown overboard and the storm seizes. Jonah has saved the sailors reluctantly, just as disobedient and with the same attitude as always, but he has saved them.

Or maybe you should say God has saved them through Jonah, physically, spiritually, and ironically, God has saved Jonah because whatever Jonah expected to happen, I bet he didn't expect a fish swallowing him up.

But that is what happened next. Jonah has become a reluctant savior and ironically against his will, he has also reluctantly been saved.

And some of you here tonight might have experienced what it feels like to be saved against your will. But looking back, you're filled with joy and gratitude.

Let me just tell you, you're not in bad company. There was another man called C.S. Lewis who writes about his conversion in a little book called, Surprised by Joy. And I'd just like to read from it a few sentences.

[24 : 21] He writes this. You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalene, night after night, feeling whenever my mind lifted even for a second from work, the steady, unrelenting approach of him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.

That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity term of 1929, I gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed.

Perhaps that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing, the divine humility which will accept the convert even on

such terms.

The prodigal son at least walked home in his own feet. But who can Julie adore that love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is broad in kicking, struggling, resentful and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape.

The words compel them to come in have been so abused by wicked men that we should shudder at them, but properly understood, they plumb the depth of the divine mercy.

[25 : 30] The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of man, and his compulsion is our liberation. That's what C.S. Lewis writes about his own conversion.

He describes himself as a prodigal, broad in kicking, struggling, reluctant against his will. And looking back, he says, the hardness of God is kinder than the softness of man, and his compulsion is our liberation.

And like C.S. Lewis, like Jonah, there are a lot of prodigals here in this room who have come to faith kicking, struggling, resentful. And yet God opened his door for you.

The only way that you will stop being reluctant is by admitting that you are in need of change, in need of prayer, in need of a Savior. And that's to close with this.

This is the good news tonight. There was a willing Savior. In the Gospel of Mark, we read a very similar account to this one here in Jonah.

[26 : 32] A few men are on a boat chatting, rowing, laughing, when suddenly a great storm comes upon them, and because they're experienced sailors, they try rowing, and they try to get the water out of their boat.

But when the storm grows stronger, they start to panic. So one of them goes down into the inner part of the boat, and he awakens up the other friend who is asleep down there, and he says, Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?

And Jesus gets up and he says, peace, be still. And then we read that the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. You see the story of Jesus and the disciples in the boat.

It's so similar to the one we read in Jonah, and it's yet very different. Like in the story of Jonah, the storm has come by God.

Like in the story of Jonah, the disciples are struck by fear of the divine powers of Jesus. Yet the difference, of course, is Jesus was not thrown overboard.

[27 : 33] Why not? Well, because he is the Son of God. Because he's God himself as part of the Trinity. Because he was there when earth and the sea were created and separated.

And because one word of his mouth is enough to calm the sea. The response of the disciples here is the same as the sailors on the ship, fear of the Lord.

You see, Jesus is the greater than Jonah prophet. Jesus did not have to be thrown overboard because Jesus never ran away. Jesus is God chasing after you in person.

His name means God saves. So in a much more real sense and a much bigger picture, in a cosmic sense, Jesus was willing to be thrown into the sea.

Not in this story, but later when he hangs on that cross, he was willingly plunged into the sea of sin and darkness into sheol to defeat death.

[28 : 34] Not because he ran away, but because he ran after you. And finally, after Jonah is thrown into the sea, we read that the raging sea grew calm.

And this is our last thought. The storm in the story of Jonah was judgment for him running away from God. It was a true expression of God's anger at his disobedient prophet.

But really, it also was a wake-up call in the most literal sense so that he would come back to God. And that's what the fish symbolizes too, a sign of mercy of God towards Jonah.

The Bible makes it clear divine justice has to be exercised without justice. What is the point? And I can understand that you might think that God is ill-tempered and vengeful.

And you might think that if you read the story of Jonah isolated or this chapter in isolation, but if you look at the bigger picture, you will see that God is a God who substitutes himself for us and suffers so that we may go free.

[29 : 42] And that is a God you can trust. God has not decided to just forget the judgment. He hasn't given Jonah the judgment he had deserved.

He woke Jonah up to call him back to himself. You can't just forget his justice because he is perfectly just unlike you and me.

Instead he's taken it upon himself in Jesus. So if you believe in him, you're free to go and to follow his commission, to follow him. So if you feel like there are storms in your life tonight, the doors of the boat are open, he's on there, just wake him up and he will speak peace into your life.

Let us pray. Father we thank you tonight for the story of Jonah, the runaway prophet, and for your mercy and for your love for running after him.

As you run after us, Father I pray that whoever is here tonight will have ears to hear and an open heart to receive that message. I ask that your Holy Spirit would apply these words to us.

[30 : 55] Father wake us up. Call us back home. Forgive us all our sins in Jesus' name. Amen.