

The Word of the Lord and the Prophet of the Lord

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[0 : 00] Well, we have two readings today, and the first is in 2 Kings and chapter 14. You'll find that on page 295.

Just a short reading from 2 Kings chapter 14 to introduce our main subject. 2 Kings chapter 14 and verse 23.

In the 15th year of Amaziah, the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned for 41 years.

And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from Leber Hamath as far as the Sea of Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hether.

For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel.

[1 : 19] But the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam, the son of Joash.

Now turn over, please, to Jonah and chapter 1. Jonah chapter 1.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their 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 on board 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.

[2 : 40] But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship, and had lain down, and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, What do you mean, O 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's 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'm 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? For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he 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. He said to them, Pick me up, and hold me into the sea. Then the sea will quiet down for you.

[3 : 46] For I know it's 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 Jenner up, and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its 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.

How sure the scriptures are. Well, we have four lunchtimes to look at this little book, the book of Jonah. I wonder what proportion of people out there in the crowded streets around know something about Jonah.

This, I'm sure, is in the top five familiar stories in the Bible. For those who don't know much, nearly everyone knows something about Jonah and the sea and the whale, even if it isn't really a whale.

[5 : 02] For those who know more, a lot of this story is familiar. Isn't this a familiar story to you? Nod your head if it is. Is it familiar to you? It's a very familiar story, isn't it? Familiar story.

Grumpy prophet. Doesn't like foreigners. Told to go and preach to foreigners. Won't go. Goes to sea instead. Storm. Prophet thrown into the sea.

Rescued by fish. Vomited up by fish on the shore. Told to go and preach to foreigners again. Goes this time, but reluctantly. Preaches to foreigners. Foreigners listen.

Prophet. Very unhappy. Take home message. He's a bad man. Don't be like him. Simple story.

What's there to understand here? Well, let me say for me, this remains one of the most perplexing books in the Bible. It's a most unusual book.

[5 : 58] Let me introduce you briefly to how unusual it is. This is a prophetic book. It belongs to the 12 minor prophets, the smaller prophets.

And yet, there are hardly any of the prophets' words in it. Isn't that a surprise? I mean, flip over a page to the book of Micah. Let's start at the beginning.

The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham and all those other kings, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. Hear you peoples, all of you, pay attention to the earth and all that's in it.

And the whole book, the whole of the rest of it, is the words of the prophet. Now, where is the message of the prophet in the book of Jonah? See if you can find it. Can anyone find it? Well, it's in one place.

Chapter 3, verse 4. Here it is. Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Full stop. That's all there is of the message of the prophet in the prophetic book of Jonah.

[6 : 58] And is that not a surprise? What a strange thing. What kind of sermon is that? And so reluctantly spoken as well. Let me give you another surprise about this book.

It's a story about God's dealings with this person. And yet much of the book says nothing about him. I mean, in one way, this book is much more about the prophet than most of the prophetic books.

In another way, he's remarkably out of focus. Let me give you an example. Look at chapter 1, verse 2. Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me, but Jonah goes somewhere else.

We're told what he does. The story follows on from what he does. And yet, we have to wait until chapter 4 for any kind of explanation for why Jonah heads out to sea instead of going to Nineveh.

Look at chapter 4, verse 3. This is where we get the explanation. Verse 2, rather. This is the first point in the story where his action in chapter 1 is explained.

[8 : 17] Is that not a surprise? No explanation in chapter 1 at all. The story seems to revolve around the prophet. But as a character, he's rather underdeveloped.

What we do know about him by the end of the book is that he's very angry. Chapter 4, verse 1. It displeased Jonah exceedingly. And he was angry.

He is one of the angriest men in the Bible. When I was a small boy, we used to have a series of little story books called Mr. Men. Has everybody come across the Mr. Men stories?

Mr. Tickle, Mr. Topsy-Turvy, Mr. Greedy, Mr. Messy, Mr. Slow. And they're all stories about how these people are topsy-turvy or greedy or messy or slow. And the things that happen to them as a result. Well, Jonah is the Bible's Mr. Angry.

Perhaps then, this book is a book about how God deals with angry men. That might be a useful thing. There are plenty of angry men in the world. You may be one. You may have one in your family. They're a real problem.

[9 : 21] Well, yes. But when we get to chapter 4, Jonah's anger is a bit difficult to pin down. Why precisely is he angry? We have to wait till chapter 4 to begin to deal with that.

It certainly isn't the focus of the book. So let me say there is more going on in this book than how God deals with his unwilling servant.

There are more important things here than the personal story of Jonah. So let's just catch up for a moment with where this story fits in the unfolding picture of the Bible.

Turn back to 2 Kings chapter 14. Sorry, I realized from the confusion earlier on that you were in 1 Kings chapter 14. 2 Kings chapter 14. We are in the reign of Jeroboam II.

Not a remarkable name from yours and my point of view. We're in the 8th century BC, mid-700s BC. The kingdom of Israel, united under David some 250 years before, is now a divided kingdom.

[10 : 30] The two parts, the north and the south, have been at war with one another and with surrounding nations. The northern part, the bigger part, is ruled over by Jeroboam II.

His capital city is Samaria. He is a successful but bad king. Verse 25. He gets back land that has been lost in battle.

And we know from other things historical that his reign was one of relative calm and prosperity for his people. This was one of the high points in the life of the northern kingdom.

Assyria, a previously troublesome enemy off to the east, was languishing at this point. Nevertheless, verse 24. He is judged as evil in terms of his relation to God and his spiritual legacy.

Now, this is important. It alerts us to the fact that things can look good and yet be dreadfully flawed at heart.

[11 : 39] Jonah is a prophet at the court of Jeroboam. Verse 25. Jeroboam restored the border of Israel according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet.

For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and none to help Israel. Things are going well superficially, but deep down things are bad, and the Lord helps them through Jonah.

Jonah is the spiritual architect of the good things that have happened in Israel. Unlike his contemporaries, Amos and Hosea, Jonah is inside the institution, helping to further the work of the king, even if he's an evil king, and it is a God-given role.

Now, keep that in your mind as we go through this book. He's come from prosperity. He's had a successful ministry back home.

Probably he's been relatively comfortable, certainly respected and appreciated. And the nation is probably feeling okay about itself at this stage. That backdrop is enormously important because it's from that situation that God says, Jonah chapter 1 verse 2, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

[13 : 18] That is a command that Jonah finds unbearable. Now, the reasons for why it seems so unbearable to him are not explored till chapter 4. See, you're just going to have to come back if you want to learn about those.

But for the moment, suffice to say that Jonah would rather be dead than go and preach to Nineveh about her impending destruction. Broadly speaking, I think there are two possible reasons that might be.

You might look to chew them over in the weeks ahead. Either he doesn't want the people of Nineveh to have a chance of avoiding destruction. He basically hates them so much he'd rather be dead than go there.

Or he sees his instruction to go and preach to those guys over there as signifying some sort of loss for him or his people back home.

And he'd rather be dead than engage with that. Either way, he'd rather be dead. And so he sets off on a trajectory towards death.

[14 : 23] Verse 3. Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He runs in the opposite direction. What does it mean to flee from the presence of the Lord?

Well, Jonah is not a theological idiot. He knows that his God is the God of everything and can't be escaped. Look at verse 9. I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

The true God cannot be run away from because he made everything. Where are you going to run? Now that is, of course, both a comfort and a threat to him and to us.

It's a comfort because there's nothing in the whole of the created order that takes you outside of where God might be influencing things. It's a threat because there's no place in the world, no corner of the mind where the creator can be shut out.

Jonah doesn't think he can get away from God. He's trying to get away from his role in relation to God's word. That little phrase, from the presence of the Lord, or from before the Lord, you can find elsewhere in the Old Testament.

[15 : 34] Elijah the prophet uses that phrase. He says, as the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain except at my word.

And a chapter or two later, he says, as the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I'll show myself to the king today. You see, the prophet stands before the Lord and receives the word of the Lord and speaks the word of the Lord to those to whom he's directed to.

And Jonah is having no more of that. And off he goes. Now, what he finds, of course, is that his God-given role of prophet cannot be avoided that easily.

But for the rest of the chapter, he's relatively unimportant. He's just running away. The chapter, the rest of the chapter, revolves around two main characters. And we're going to spend the last ten minutes looking at those two main characters in the rest of chapter one.

They are, first, the sailors, and second, the sea. And we're going to look at the second first. The sea is everywhere in this chapter.

[16 : 47] Verse four, it's mentioned twice. Verse five, the sea. Verse nine, the sea that God made. Verse 11, the sea. Verse 12, it's mentioned twice. Verse 13, the sea grew more and more tempestuous.

Verse 15, Jonah's thrown into the sea. And it ceases from its raging. The sea is a major player in this drama. Now, that has little impact with us. The sea is just the place we'd go to get a sunburn in holiday time.

But in the Bible, especially in Bible poetry, the sea is a word loaded with negativity. Genesis chapter one, do you remember?

Right at the beginning. In the beginning, dark, undifferentiated, watery chaos into which God's word brings order.

And from that point on, the sea, though a good thing that God has made, is in some sense viewed as being hostile to God and to his people.

[17 : 48] The sea, sometimes containing a great swimming monster that swims around in it, is an image of hostility towards God, an enemy of God and his people.

And the true God is described in the Psalms as the God who shuts the sea behind doors with a command and calms its storm with a word and slays its monster with his mighty hand.

He is able to control it, though it is a hostile force. The sea is a loaded image for a Hebrew audience. And Jonah, the prophet, the speaker of God's powerful word, heads for the sea rather than speaking that word.

It's there as early as verse three. Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish. Now, Tarshish is probably not a name for a specific place like Glasgow or Edinburgh or Newcastle.

It's probably a more generic term. That place a long way over there by the side of the sea where the boats go. It's probably used of a number of seafaring places.

[18 : 58] What they have in common is that they're seafaring places. One modern commentator translates verse three like this. Jonah set out to flee out to sea away from Yahweh.

So great is his antipathy towards God's plan for him that he sets out in a trajectory towards chaos, disorder, oblivion and death.

Instead of the life-giving word of the Lord, Jonah chooses the sea. And that, of course, is where he finds himself in verse 15.

Lost in the depths of it. Unable to escape the end point of his choice. As chapter two makes clear, he is saved from the place of the dead.

Jonah sets out for chaos and death rather than doing what God tells him to do. But though the sea is an anti-God image, God rules over it.

[20 : 05] Everything that happens in this chapter suggests that God is totally in control of the sea. Verse four. He hurled a great wind upon it. That's why there's a storm. Verse nine.

I fear Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Verse 12. It's because of me that this great tempest has come upon you in the sea. Verse 15. They picked him up and hurled him into the sea and it ceased from his raging.

God is in control of the sea. God is totally in control, even of those things that seem most in opposition to him in the world.

Now, friends, it doesn't matter where you look. Whether you look at the natural disasters in the world. Whether you look at the natural disasters in the world. Whether you look at the natural disasters in the world. Whether you look at human wickedness and the tyranny of human rule.

Or whether you look at sickness and death. None of those are positive things. Often they seem utterly in control of human experience.

[21 : 05] You may feel that they're utterly in control of your experience right now. But the true God rules over them all. Even when they seem totally in control.

And if you feel overwhelmed by those things, do not despair. The good God is totally in control. Even of the most anti-God looking things.

You don't see it yet. But you will in the end. It is possible for God's plans for your life.

For his people. For his prophets. For his messengers. To seem utterly revolting to them. God's plans seemed revolting to Jonah.

But God is much, much, much, much bigger and greater. And more merciful and generous and kinder than his people can possibly imagine.

[22 : 09] Sometimes the sharp end of that is that he does things and requires things. That his people, creatures as we are. Small and finite.

And sinful as we are. Turned in on ourselves. Sometimes God does and requires things that seem abhorrent to his servants at the time.

But they will not seem so in the end. The good God is completely in control. And his control here is seen in the other great player in chapter one.

That is the sailors. We are going to spend the rest of our time on the sailors. The sailors are the main human characters in chapter one of this book. Jonah is not all that important. But as Jonah moves away, outwards, to the sea, towards death.

The sailors come closer and closer and closer to life. And the story is built around three episodes of fear on the part of the sailors.

[23 : 16] Three times we're told that they're afraid. And each time their fear is in response to something that God does. Let's look at those quickly. Each time they make progress.

First, verses four and five. The Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea. And there was a mighty tempest on the sea. And the ship threatened to break up.

Then the mariners were afraid. And each cried out to his God. God brings the tempest. The sailors are afraid. They do all the stuff you'd normally do. They pray, verse five.

It's only our age that views prayer as an abnormal thing to do in difficulty. They take action, verse five. Jonah's careless disengagement seems ridiculous to them, verse six.

Why is he sleeping in the hold when we're about to drown? We get to the next episode of fear, verse nine. Eventually, they get round to finding what's going on here.

[24 : 16] They ask Jonah where he's come from, what he's doing. I'm a Hebrew. I fear the God of heaven who made the sea and the land. Then they were exceedingly afraid. What are you thinking of?

Running away from the God who's made everything and controls everything. What an idiot you are. Then they ask him for the solution. And he gives it. Verse 12.

Pick me up and hurl me into the sea. Then it'll quieten down. I know it's because of me that this great tempest has come upon you. They don't like that idea much. The sailors, with the little they know about God, are a great deal more compassionate than Jonah, the Lord's prophet.

They try to get him back to shore. They row as hard as they can. But the storm gets worse. Unlike Jonah, who shows no compassion for the people of Nineveh, the sailors are compassionate for the one who's brought all this problem on them.

Notice what they do then. Verse 14. Then they called out to the Lord. They're now calling God by his name. They know God's in control.

[25 : 31] They know who's in control. Jonah's God is in control. They call him by name. And then their third bout of fear. Verse 15.

They picked up Jonah and hurled them into the sea. And the sea ceased from its raging. Then they feared the Lord exceedingly. And they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vans.

Do you see the pattern? Jonah knows the Lord. Jonah knows the Lord. And runs from his word. A word that God has spoken out of compassion.

And Jonah doesn't want to speak. But the word of the Lord cannot be escaped so easily. And Jonah, the uncompassionate, unwilling, distant, disengaged, careless, the speaker who doesn't want to speak, is used by God to speak to the sailors in such a way that the sailors end up doing what Jonah won't do.

You see what they do? They fear the Lord. And they offer a sacrifice to him and make vows. He doesn't fear God, but they do.

[26 : 45] He won't serve God, but they make their vows to God. Friends, this chapter is not really about Jonah. This chapter is about the word of God and its relentless progress.

God wants pagan people to know about him. And even a prophet bent on oblivion can't stop himself being used for that purpose.

Sometimes people hate what God is doing in the world. Sometimes people hate God extending his kindness to others.

Sometimes people hate God making himself known. Either they hate the way he's doing it or the people he's doing it to. But he is, verse 9, the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

His word is good, kind, merciful, gracious. To resist it, as Jonah finds out, is absolute folly.

[27 : 58] To trust it, as the sailors find, is the route to peace and to life. Let's pray together. Listen to the words of this most reluctant speaker.

I am a Hebrew. 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?

Gracious God, so often it seems in this world that anti-God forces rule.

We look around and we can't miss the disaster and the wickedness, the stubbornness and selfishness, the sickness and death.

All of these things that we know to be not your ultimate plan for this world. They seem so powerful. But we thank you that you rule over them.

[29 : 27] And we thank you that you have gracious plans. Plans to extend your word of life to all sorts of people.

Please help us to be glad receivers of your word. And eager to speak it. Rather than stubborn and obstinate and resisting it.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.