

# 1. Jonah - Learning the Hard Way: Why Jonah ran away from God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we have four Sunday evenings, God willing, with this book of Jonah, and I do very much hope that we'll be able to get to the heart of the message of the book by the end of that time.

We may not quite get to the heart of it this evening, but I hope that as the weeks go on we will. So tonight we're going to be in chapter one with the title, Why Jonah Tried to Run Away from God. Let me say a few things first by way of introduction to the book of Jonah. At surface level, there's something rather comical about this book.

In fact, it's almost like a comic strip. It's the kind of story which would lend itself to being set out rather like a cartoon. You can think of a cartoon painter or a maker of cartoons setting the whole thing out.

We have Jonah, a little cartoon figure, listening to this voice from heaven speaking to him. And when he hears the voice from heaven at the beginning of Jonah chapter one, a big cartoon frown appears in his forehead.

[ 1 : 03 ] And the voice from heaven says, Jonah, go this way. And Jonah goes that way. And then in the next scene in the cartoon, he's in the ship.

And it's a very choppy sea. The sailors are panicking and they're crying out to their gods in prayer to save them. But below deck, again picture this as a cartoon, there's Jonah putting out the Zeds, isn't he?

Zed, Zed, Zed. He's not panicking. He's not praying. He's out of it. He's deep in the land of Nod, conscious of nothing. And then in the next scene, you have these anxious looking sailors tossing Jonah overboard.

And then the cartoonist, I guess, would really go to town at this point as we see Jonah sinking down below the surface of the sea and the great gruesome shape of a great fish opening its cavernous jaws and devouring Jonah as easily as you devour two squares of chocolate or two peas off a fork. And there he is, inside the whale, or the whatever it is, surrounded by the internal debris of an ocean-going monster, the stinking fishy contents of a vast belly.

[ 2 : 12 ] And then after his prayer, and I guess this would be the cartoonist's moment of greatest glory when we get to chapter 2, verse 10, the great fish opens its mouth and with a great rumbling explosion, the grandmother of all burps, Jonah is expelled onto the beach and he sits there, taking out of his hair and ears a matted mixture of fish skins and seaweed.

And the second half of the book is equally cartoonable, with Jonah marching off through Nineveh and announcing his message to the people of Nineveh, still looking pretty disgruntled. And then you have him finally sitting outside the city, perhaps on a little hill outside, shading himself with this ridiculous castor oil plant.

And then along comes a malevolent worm below ground with big teeth and it gnaws at this plant and destroys it and the plant withers. And we leave Jonah at the very end of the book, still looking pretty cross and wretched as he was at the beginning and still with many question marks in his mind.

Now my guess is that a number of us still think of the book of Jonah in that kind of way, as a glorified Bible cartoon.

And if we do, we're likely to think of the book as an Old Testament lightweight, almost as a piece of comic relief, something to give us a moment's breather between the heavyweight prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah or Hosea.

[ 3 : 38 ] But to look at it that way is not to do justice to the book at all. This is not a backwater of Old Testament prophecy. It may be a short book and I don't deny for a moment that there are comic elements in it, elements that are there on purpose to bring a laugh to our face.

Indeed, we find elements of that kind in many parts of the Bible, sufficient to suggest that the sense of humour that we possess might just owe itself to the Lord himself who made us in his image. But despite those elements, this is a serious Old Testament book and it has a tremendously challenging message for us. It's really a message that runs right through the Bible, as I hope we'll see over these next few weeks.

And it's a message much greater than simply about the folly of disobeying God, though of course it includes that as well. Let me say two other things by way of introduction.

The first about the Moby Dick element in the book, and the second about whether we're meant to read this story as history or simply as a parable or a moral tale. First then about the great fish.

[ 4 : 50 ] Campbell Morgan, the 20th century preacher, once wrote about the book of Jonah, men have looked so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God.

Now in the book of Jonah, there are 48 verses. And of those 48 verses, only three deal with the great fish. Now I know that the Lord Jesus, when he quotes the example of Jonah, he refers to him being in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights.

But he has his reasons for doing that, as we'll see in due course. And Jesus' reasons have nothing to do with a developed interest in marine biology. You know how it is over the centuries, various Christians have spent a lot of effort trying to prove that it's possible for various large sea creatures to devour a man whole without actually killing the man.

And that it's even possible for a man to survive for 72 hours inside a whale shark or a sperm whale or a baleen whale or a blue whale or whatever. But surely that kind of exercise in demonstrating the capacities of various sea creatures, it misses the point.

The book of Jonah is about something much more important than the shape of a whale's throat or even the oxygen holding capacities of a whale's stomach. And even the point that people often make about this beast being a fish rather than a mammal is hardly important or even very interesting.

[ 6 : 18 ] This book is not in the Bible to send Christians into anxious speculations about the precise biological identification of the creature that swallowed Jonah. This is a book of theology, not a book about marine biology.

If you want to read a great book on whales and the wonders of the world's whales, read Moby Dick by Herman Melville. It's a terrific 19th century novel. It's a great book. I love it. You'll find all you need to know about whales there and a great deal more as well.

But don't let strap all that kind of stuff onto the book of Jonah. We have something more important here than the tale of a whale. Then second, let's read this book as history rather than as a glorified non-historical Aesop's fable.

I think there are two main reasons why we should regard the book as historical. The first is that it's written that way. It is written to us as history. Fables and romances are written in a very different way.

You think, for example, of C.S. Lewis's Tales of Narnia or J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. Great stories with wonderful events and characters that are developed very interestingly, tensions built up and resolved, but they're obviously non-historical tales.

[ 7 : 36 ] If you have a ten-year-old child who's in school in the geography class and your child asks the geography teacher at school, please miss, is Narnia in Scandinavia? The teacher's going to think that your child has been brought up on planet Zog, isn't she?

She's going to say, what sort of a home does this child come from? Doesn't this child know where Narnia is and that it's not on earth at all? Now, the book of Jonah is not written like that kind of romance.

There's nothing of the Narnia here. Look at the very first verse. Now, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh.

Now, Nineveh was a real city. It was the capital of Assyria in Old Testament times. And Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a real Old Testament prophet. In fact, he's mentioned in the second book of Kings, chapter 14, verse 25.

Don't look it up now, but we will look at it later. But in 2 Kings 14, verse 25, he's mentioned as Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hefer. And if you take down your Bible atlas and you look up Gath Hefer, you'll find that it was a small town, perhaps a village, about ten miles to the west of the Sea of Nazareth in the kingdom of Israel in those times.

[ 8 : 51 ] So this book is written as history. And we can take it that the author, who might even have been Jonah himself, regards it as history, fact. Then the second reason for taking this book of Jonah as historical is that Jesus regarded it as historical.

Let's turn up Matthew 12, verse 40 at this point. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 12, verse 40. And I'll read verse 39 and verse 40. Jesus, as so often, is in dispute with the Pharisees and scribes. So Matthew 12, verse 39. He answered them. They've asked him for a sign. He answers them. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

[ 9 : 58 ] Now, it would be a very odd thing for Jesus to compare his own death and resurrection, which of course were historical, with a mythical death and resurrection.

If Jesus had regarded the story of Jonah as fiction, he would have been giving his own death and resurrection a very shaky footing by comparing it with a mythical three days' stay in a monster's belly.

It would be rather like Mother coming in one day from the garden with some fresh beans picked from the vegetable patch and telling the children, these beans are just like the ones that Jack planted in his garden and grew the beanstalk from.

And the children would say, Mother, have you taken leave of your senses? Can you really compare real beans with Jack's beans? It wouldn't make sense. Look on to the next verse in Matthew, chapter 12, verse 41.

The men of Nineveh, says Jesus, will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

[ 11 : 02 ] It's the same point there. Is Jesus really suggesting that the men of Nineveh repented mythologically at the preaching of Jonah or that Jonah's preaching is really a fairy tale?

Of course not. The day of judgment that he's talking about there is altogether too real for Jesus to treat it in terms of something that he thought to be a myth. Jesus is comparing like with like.

The story of Jonah is as solidly historical as his own death and resurrection, as solid indeed as the day of judgment. So let's allow the Lord Jesus to teach us that the book of Jonah is no parable.

If the Lord was confident that it was history, then we can be confident as well. All right, let's turn back then to Jonah, chapter 1, page 774.

I want us this evening to ask two questions. First, why was Jonah so horrified at the Lord's command to go off and preach his message against the people of Nineveh?

[ 12 : 04 ] And second, and it's really the other side of the same coin, second, why was the Lord so determined that Jonah should go to Nineveh in order to preach there? In a sense, the whole of this book turns on the clash of two wills, the Lord's will and purpose and Jonah's will, which are in conflict.

The Lord says, Jonah, go to Nineveh and preach there. And Jonah says, I will not. Now, if we can come to understand why the Lord was so determined to send Jonah to Nineveh and why Jonah was so determined not to go to Nineveh, we will have reached the heart of the book and we'll have come to understand something of God's purpose and plan and I think something of the nature of the human heart as well.

So let me read the first three verses again. 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.

Now, here's our first question. Why was Jonah so horrified at the Lord's command to go and preach judgment against the city of Nineveh? We can see just how horrified Jonah was by his reaction to the Lord's commandment.

[13:37] But if he'd simply been a lazy man or a stubborn man, surely he would have stayed at home in his house at Gath Hefer in the land of Israel and got on with the nuts and bolts of his life, plowing his few acres of land, providing for his family, teaching his children the law of Moses, and so on.

But no, there was something so utterly appalling from Jonah's point of view in what God was telling him to do that he rose and fled to the port of Joppa to find a ship.

Look at verse 3. He rose to flee. Flee means move at top speed, doesn't it? So he became a fugitive. He showed a clean pair of heels.

He was on the run. Now, look at it like this. If somebody said to you, go to Aberdeen, why don't you, and work there for a while, if you could see no good reason for going to Aberdeen and working there for a while, you would simply stay in Glasgow, wouldn't you?

Get on with your life in Glasgow. You wouldn't go down to George Square and take the first shuttle bus to Paisley, to Glasgow Airport, and then hop on the first plane you could take to Chicago, would you?

[14:51] But that's the equivalent of what Jonah did. He didn't just stay at home in Gath Hefer and get on with his ordinary life. He was so appalled and terrified and scandalized that he showed a clean pair of heels going southwestwards, due southwestwards, when the Lord was commanding him to go due northeastwards to Nineveh.

He went in precisely the opposite direction. Now, look at the emphasis here in verse 3. He rose to flee from the presence of the Lord.

And again at the end of verse 3, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. And again, now Tarshish was probably Spain.

Nobody's quite sure where Tarshish was, but the scholars think it was probably Spain. And Spain was and is nearly 2,000 miles westwards from the coast of Israel.

It was, if you like, the furthest away part of the known world. So Jonah wasn't just stubbornly saying to the Lord, I won't do it. He was trying to remove himself altogether from the Lord's presence.

[16:00] Now, what a thing to do. It's reminiscent of what happens to Cain in the book of Genesis. Remember Cain in Genesis 4.16, when he's been judged? Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Jonah almost seems to be trying to follow in Cain's footsteps to remove himself from the sphere of salvation altogether. It's almost as if he is saying, I'd rather not belong to the Lord at all than to go and preach his message in Nineveh.

This is an extreme adverse reaction. In fact, he's even prepared to pay good money to go to Tarshish. He buys a ticket. And I guess a ticket from Joppa to Tarshish would have cost him more than it would cost you and me to take the bus to Strathbunga.

It was a very long way. He was prepared to drain his bank account if only he could get away from this dreadful summons to preach in Nineveh. So the question is, why?

Why this adverse and violent reaction to God's command? Well, I think we may pick up various clues if we turn back to 2 Kings 14, verse 23.

[17:14] Let me encourage you to do that. 2 Kings 14, you'll find this on page 321 in our big Bibles. 2 Kings 14, and in a moment I'll read the little paragraph from verse 23 to 27.

But I'll just say a word or two about it first. This paragraph, which includes the other Old Testament reference to Jonah there in chapter 25, it records the history of the reign of one king of Israel, Israel, and his name was Jeroboam, the son of Joash, Jeroboam II.

And Jeroboam's reign stretched from about 800 BC to about 760 BC, 41 years we're told, roughly 800 to 760.

Now at this stage in Old Testament history, the two nations of Israel in the north and Judah in the south, which had originally been united under the kingship of David and Solomon, the two nations had parted company.

In fact, the two kingdoms had split apart more than 100 years previously in about 920 BC. And Israel, the northern of the two kingdoms, was characterized by its godlessness.

[18:30] And that godlessness all stemmed from its first king after the breakaway. The first king was Jeroboam I, Jeroboam the son of Nebat. And Jeroboam the son of Nebat set up the kingdom on principles of idolatry.

Idolatry. Unlike Judah with its capital at Jerusalem, which was still seeking, even if in a rather half-hearted fashion, to worship the Lord at the temple. So Jonah the prophet is living up in the northern kingdom of Israel at Gath Hefer, this godless kingdom that was set up by Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

And as I read these verses, see if you can spot what it must have been like for Jonah the prophet. Jonah a godly man to live under this kind of regime in the land of Israel.

So 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 41 years.

Samaria was the capital of Israel. 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, the first Jeroboam, which he made Israel to sin.

[ 19 : 44 ] He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-Hamath as far as the sea of the 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-Hefa.

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. 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, verse 24 here makes the point that Israel had not departed from the sinful ways of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, its first king.

But despite that ingrained, inbuilt idolatry and godlessness, God was still willing, it appears, to help the people of Israel. He had not cast them off.

And he gave a word of promise to the people of Israel by the mouth of the prophet Jonah. And you'll see in verse 25 that Jonah prophesied that King Jeroboam II would be able to recapture quite a large piece of land which Israel had previously lost.

[ 21 : 00 ] And that's exactly what happened. Jeroboam restored the border of Israel from Lebo-Hamath as far as the Sea of the Araba. So that was a great moment for the land of Israel.

It was a little bit like the Scots recapturing Cumbria, for example, from the English or Northumbria and giving one in the eye to the English which would be a great moment, wouldn't it? If you weren't English.

So that was the kind of feeling they had. Part of the land which had been theirs was restored. Now why did the Lord graciously help Israel to re-establish her borders even when Israel was full of sin and idolatry?

Because, verse 26, he saw that Israel's affliction was very bitter. It's like that moment at the end of Exodus 2 when the Lord looks down and sees the groaning of the people of Israel and remembers his promise to them.

He sees that there was no one to help her. No one to help Israel. Israel couldn't ring up Washington in those days and ask for a bit of help from the US Navy. No, the Lord had compassion on Israel and helped her.

[ 22 : 07 ] As verse 27 puts it, he had never intended to blot out the name of Israel from under heaven. Now what would Jonah the prophet have made of all this?

He was one of the few people in Israel who would have wanted to follow the ways of the Lord. There he was in Gath-Hefer and Gath-Hefer was well up into the northern part of the northern kingdom a long way from Jerusalem and Judah where at least the outward forms of the true faith were still being followed.

So there was Jonah surrounded by godlessness and all manner of idolatrous worship and practice. Do you think he denounced the sins of the people of Israel? Well he wouldn't have been much of an Old Testament prophet if he didn't.

That's what Old Testament prophets did. You've only got to read the prophecies of Amos and Hosea for example. Men who were only a decade or two younger than Jonah and they were preaching up in Israel, the northern kingdom, not down in Judah and they delivered blistering devastating attacks on the sins of their contemporaries.

They also spoke lovely words of comfort and restoration. So if Jonah was known as a prophet, the prophet from Gath Hefer, then surely his ministry would have been much like the ministry of Amos and Hosea.

[ 23 : 23 ] And yet this prophet, this godly man living amidst pagan idolatry which must have tortured his soul day after day and which he must have denounced regularly, this man saw the Lord

strengthening and helping Israel, even comforting the idolatrous people of Israel in their afflictions.

And the Lord used Jonah's own words as a channel for his strength and comfort. Perhaps Jonah then began to realize deep in his soul, deep almost in his subconscious mind, that the God of Israel was unfathomably gracious and compassionate when he need not have been.

Wouldn't it have been more fitting and more just if he treated the Israelites as he had treated Sodom and Gomorrah? In other words, by raining fire and brimstone down upon them and cleansing the promised land of its abominations?

But on the contrary, the Lord God helped Israel, had compassion upon her, even in the midst of her godlessness, and he even used Jonah's mouth, Jonah's words, as a means of increasing Israel's national prosperity.

What kind of a God was Jonah dealing with? A God who seemed more interested in helping and sustaining godless people than in crushing them and destroying them, as Jonah felt that he ought to have done.

[ 24 : 56 ] Of course, the Israelites were his own people. Presumably, Jonah had uncles and aunts and cousins, brothers and sisters and nephews and so on, in the greater Gath-Hefer area.

Perhaps his mother and father were still living. So he would have been glad to see Israel prosper, at least for their sake. So even if Jeroboam II was a godless king, it would have been comforting to think, that Jonah's relatives and friends were able to live in a little more security and peace in Israel. But then, there came this day for Jonah, this life-changing day which he was never going to forget. He had preached to his own people, he'd seen God's kindness to them despite their sinfulness, but now came this new day when the Lord said to him, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach against Nineveh, because its evil has come to my attention.

And Jonah said to himself, this is more than I can bear. If God were to show the same kind of compassion to the Ninevites that he has done to the Israelites, he's not going to judge them and destroy them, he'll let them off the hook.

I'm coming to realize that that is the kind of God he is and I can't bear it. God was the issue with Jonah was that he was coming to understand what the real God was like, and he didn't like what he was discovering.

[ 26 : 24 ] And let me put it like this, to shed a little bit of more modern light on it. If you were to sign up with a missionary society, I'm sure some of you will do that at some point, but you sign up with a missionary society, you're preparing to be a foreign missionary, and your society sends you overseas to some great city, would you go gladly to that city?

Well, I guess you would, wouldn't you? If you'd signed up to be a missionary, you'd go gladly when the moment came. I mean, you might have a few questions to ask about poisonous snakes and do we have to boil the water and tropical diseases and that sort of thing, but you would go, wouldn't you?

And you would preach the gospel. Now, would you preach judgment or salvation? Somebody say, which of those would you preach, judgment or salvation?

Somebody. Had salvation from here? Any other offers? Both. Thank you. Thank you. Both is the answer. If we're really going to preach, yes, we would preach salvation, of course, but we must preach judgment as well if we're to preach the Bible truly.

If we don't explain that we're being saved from the judgment of God, we can't present what salvation is all about, so we must preach both, mustn't we, salvation and judgment. So you would go to this foreign city, you'd preach the message of the gospel, the judgment of God and the salvation that he's provided in the hope that and with the prayer that many people would understand your message and be saved.

[ 27 : 54 ] And what you would long to do would be to see a church established there if there was no church and people coming, many people coming to Christ and enjoying salvation. And when you were out there, wherever it was, you'd send emails back to us here telling us the good news that this person and that person has become a Christian and we would rejoice with you.

You'd go to the foreign city seeking the salvation of the people there. But Jonah, you see, was not like that when the Lord sent him to Nineveh. He didn't say to the Lord, Lord, thank you so much for this command.

Here I am, send me. As Isaiah said a few decades later, he didn't say that. He didn't hurry off to the offices of the Assyrian Missionary Society and agreed to get all his friends at home to support him

and pray for him.

He fled to Joppa because this commission was more than he could handle. If he could have got there, he would have fled to Tarshish. And if he got to Tarshish and heard that there was a place called California, I guess he would have gone there as well.

So why does the Lord's prophet, the Lord's man, this godly man known to be a prophet, why does he find the Lord's commission so dreadful and horrible? Let me make two suggestions, two reasons.

[ 29 : 09 ] First, because the Assyrians, whose capital city was Nineveh, were horrible people. And they posed a great military threat to the little country, the little nation state of Israel.

In Jonah's day, in about 780 BC, Assyria was something of a sleeping giant. It hadn't really begun to flex its military muscles, which was going to happen a few decades later.

But people, far-sighted people who understood something about international politics and geography, realized that Assyria could easily be stirred up into empire-building ambition if it were to be led by a strong and ruthless commander.

And that's exactly what happened some 40 years after Jonah's day. A ferocious man called Tiglath-Pileser III became the emperor of Assyria and he set out to conquer and dominate as much of the known world as he possibly could.

He wanted to build a great empire. And in fact, Israel fell to the Assyrians in 721 BC. And that was the end of Israel. It simply was terminated as a nation state.

[ 30 : 20 ] Now, the Assyrian army were trained in warfare to be more barbaric and more brutal towards captured soldiers than any other army, ancient or modern.

I won't tell you because you might feel a bit nauseated, but I won't tell you what they did to captured enemy soldiers, except to say that I would rather fall into the jaws of a man-eating tiger than be captured by the Assyrian army in the 8th century BC.

They were utterly brutal. Jonah would have known about their behavior. So I think you have to feel a little bit of sympathy with him for not wanting to go there. But the second reason, the more important reason really, why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh was that he hadn't yet accepted that the God of Israel was the God of the whole earth and had saving plans for the Gentile nations as well as for the Jewish people.

What it boils down to is that Jonah had been a rather selective Bible reader. Now, of course, in 780 BC in his day, he wouldn't have had the whole of the Old Testament as we have it.

But he would certainly have known the books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. He would have known 1 and 2 Samuel. And he would have known many of the Psalms as well, because King David lived some 200 years before him.

[ 31 : 39 ] But there was this element in the Old Testament which Jonah no doubt knew all about, but wanted to avoid. And that was God's great purpose to extend his salvation and compassion and grace to the Gentiles.

Jonah, how well do you know your book of Genesis? Have you been a keen student of Genesis? Did your father, Amittai, teach you Genesis when you were a boy in short pants?

Yes, yes, of course I know Genesis. I'm a prophet of the Lord, after all, recognized as such in the land of Israel. Well, Jonah, if you know your Genesis so well, what was that promise that God made to Abraham at the beginning of Genesis chapter 12?

Well, the Lord promised Abraham that he would show him and give him a great land, the promised land, you know, the land of Canaan, and that he would make of Abraham a great nation whom he would bless.

Go on, Jonah, what else did he promise Abraham? Well, you can't expect me to remember everything about every verse in Genesis, surely. I mean, a man has his limits, I have my limitations. Well, let me tell you, what he also promised Abraham was that through him, through Abraham, all the families of the earth would be blessed.

[ 32 : 55 ] Have you forgotten that, Jonah? Well, it rings a vague bell now that you mention it.

Jonah, let me test you on your Psalms. I want to read you a few verses from one of the Psalms, and I want you to tell me which Psalm it is.

Here we go. May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God. Let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity, and guide the nations upon earth.

God shall bless us. Let all the ends of the earth fear him. Now, Jonah, which Psalm is that? Psalm 67, of course, a wonderful Psalm.

What do you think it's about, Jonah? It's about God's grace and saving power. Grace to whom, Jonah? Well, probably, I should say, to the Australians, probably.

[ 34 : 02 ] They need a lot of grace, don't they, with all those kangaroos and poisonous spiders about. Do you think, Jonah, that it might have included the Assyrians? Don't you talk to me about the Assyrians.

Well, you can see the point I'm trying to make in my ham-fisted way, can't you? Jonah would have known his books of Moses and his Psalms. He would have known that the Lord's plans were always much bigger than plans merely for the people of Israel.

Israel, and he knew that God was compassionate towards sinners, because he'd seen God's compassion shown to his own countrymen in Israel when they didn't deserve it.

But he couldn't bear to think that the horrible, obnoxious Assyrians might possibly be let off the hook and graciously spared. Well, friends, just two very brief points as we finish and before you fall into a coma.

First, the gospel is for the world. The gospel is for the world. The book of Jonah forces us to think of the people that we instinctively fear or dislike the most.

[ 35 : 06 ] And it forces us to realize that the gospel is for them. It's not just for people like us. It's for people like the Assyrians. What types or groups of people might we think of in the same way that Jonah thought about the Assyrians?

The Taliban in Afghanistan? How about Osama bin Laden and his cronies in Al-Qaeda? I'm sure you could think of other people as well.

People whose lives are driven by hatred and barbaric cruelty. Jonah had to learn that God had a message of grace for the Assyrians as well as for the Jews.

We have to learn the same lesson. And if we've begun to learn it, we must learn it more deeply. So the gospel is for the world. And the world includes Nineveh. But then secondly, the Bible teaches us, this is a more general point, the Bible teaches us what God is really like.

You would have thought that Jonah, as a recognized prophet, would have known what God was like. And he did know really what God was like. It's just that he couldn't bear to acknowledge just how enormously compassionate God really was.

[ 36 : 20 ] this book of Jonah is here in scripture to expand and focus and clarify our understanding of the Lord God.

I'm a keen bird spotter. And when I take my energetic dog out for a walk, as I do every day, I always take a pair of binoculars with me to spot the birds. Because if the lesser spotted yellow-bellied bazoopa pops up out of the reeds, I quickly like to get my binoculars on it. But very often, once the binoculars are up, I have to focus by turning that little wheel on the binoculars until I can see the bird clearly.

I can see then whether it's winking at me or just coughing. Now the Bible acts as a focusing mechanism. Our unaided eye cannot see God clearly.

By nature, we're ignorant of him. We're ignoramuses as far as God is concerned. Our minds are so weak and our hearts are so corrupt that we can only get the most indistinct and blurred view of him if left to ourselves.

But when we read the Bible, it's like looking at him through focused binoculars. We begin at last to see him as he is, rather than as someone who is simply the product of our imagination.

[ 37 : 35 ] Now the book of Jonah is in the Bible to help us to understand aspects of God's nature more clearly. Jonah knew in his heart of hearts what God was like, but he was avoiding the truth about God.

And the Lord put Jonah through his unforgettable experience so as to change him. God was determined that Jonah should know the truth about him.

And God deals with us through the book of Jonah for exactly the same reason. He is determined that we should know the truth about him. Well friends, we've only just put our toe into the water of the book of Jonah tonight, if I can use that expression.

But next week we'll need to have more than our toe in the water. We'll need to be positively submarine. Shall we bow our heads and we'll pray. Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish, to flee right away from the presence of the Lord.

Dear Lord God, we do pray that you will help us not to be like the prophet Jonah in that respect, but rather to flee to you and to read our scriptures so that we can get to know you better and to see you more clearly as you really are.

[ 38 : 58 ] So please have mercy upon us and continue to open the eyes of our hearts to understand you, to know you, to love you, and to serve you. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.