

Do you actually fear God?

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bibles for our reading, and we're going to read in the prophet Jonah from Jonah chapter 1. That is on page 774 if you have one of our blue church visitors Bibles.

If you don't have one of those, well, you'll have to find it. It's one of those tricky ones in the minor prophets near the end of the Old Testament, after Obadiah and before Micah. Just hiding there to embarrass you as you try and find it very difficult.

So I'll give you a moment. Jonah chapter 1, and we're going to read the whole chapter, which does go right to verse 17, which is, for some strange reason, chopped off at the end under a separate heading, most unhelpfully.

So obviously somebody was feeling a bit off when they were putting the headings in the Bible. Jonah chapter 1 at verse 1. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, capital of the Assyrian Empire, 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.

[1 : 32] 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. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship, and lain 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, and 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's your country? 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.

[2 : 45] 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 had told them.

Then they said to him, What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us? For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, Pick me up, and hurl me into the sea.

Then the sea will quieten 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 couldn't, 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 the 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 its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord, and made vows.

[4 : 07] 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.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, good evening.

It would be great if you could have Jonah chapter 1 open in front of you as we go through. Now, I'm sure most of us here tonight will be familiar with the book of Jonah in some shape or form.

And I imagine that our overriding memory of studying the book of Jonah was probably in Sunday school. There, we learnt not to grow up to be big racists, and share the good news of Jesus with everybody indiscriminately.

Now, that is a good lesson to learn from the book of Jonah, and an appropriate application. But I think the book of Jonah is far more cutting than that.

[5 : 14] And if we're to make the most out of this mini-series, I think we need to be asking ourselves constantly, why was this letter actually written, this book? What was it that Jonah wanted the people of Israel to learn from this letter back in his day?

What did he hope that his words would achieve in the hearts of the people? And why on earth did he write such a damning account of himself for such a wide and general readership?

Well, I'm convinced that Jonah wrote this book after he had learnt the lessons that he needed to learn. And he wrote this book because he wanted Israel to learn the same lessons that he had learnt.

So Jonah wrote them his story that they might see the ugliness of his behaviour and see that exact same behaviour exhibited in themselves.

Jonah's account of his trip to Nineveh is his way of painting an honest portrait both of himself and of the nation of Israel. Jonah hopes that by letting Israel see what she looks like, warts and all, through his story, that Israel will be repulsed and finally change her ways.

[6 : 38] Another way to think of it is to think of Jonah as being like a mini-Israel. Everything we see in Jonah's behaviour and attitude and heart reflects the heart of the people of Israel.

So then how does this book then relate to us? Well, once we've made the link between Jonah and Israel, we can finally make the jump to us and put the spotlight on us and be examined ourselves. We're not supposed to stand back from this book and judge Jonah, nor are we to glance down our noses at him or the people of Israel. No, rather we're supposed to recognise our propensity to be just like him and recognise that we need to learn the exact same lessons that both Jonah learned and the people of Israel needed to learn too.

And I think as we go along, we'll find that those lessons are quite revealing of our own hearts and very searching. Lessons about our terrible apathy, despite our great privilege.

Lessons about our hypocrisy and inconsistency, but also thankfully lessons about our wonderfully gracious and merciful God who we are called to imitate.

[8 : 00] So let's delve right into chapter one and remember to put ourselves under the examination as we spend some time scrutinising Jonah. Our first point for this evening is that you shouldn't pick and choose.

Our walk with God cannot resemble that of a child walking through a pick and mix shop. We can't just choose the things that we like and ignore anything that we dislike.

And this is the kind of behaviour that we see in Jonah. The whole of this first chapter, I think, focuses around verse nine. All centres around verse nine.

Verse nine, Jonah claims that he fears the Lord. The God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. But as a reader, I think we're left scratching our heads a bit because all we know, Jonah, so far is that God has called him to a task and rather than obeying God and going to Nineveh, he's defiantly set sail in the opposite direction.

I mean, we don't really know where Tarshish is. Some commentators say it's in Spain. Some people say India. But what's important is what it says at the end of verse three where we get the theological explanation.

[9 : 19] Jonah was fleeing away from the presence of the Lord. He wanted nothing to do with God nor his plans to pronounce judgment on Nineveh.

So can we really say that Jonah fears the Lord? And when the sailors are calling out in anguish, chucking boxes and cargo over the side of the ship, crying out to any pagan God who will listen to them when God has hurled a storm against them, Jonah is just laying down in the bottom of the ship, fast asleep.

The sailors were fearful of this God who had sent the storm, though they didn't know him by name yet. But Jonah just didn't seem to care at all, does he?

He's fast asleep in blissful apathy. So does Jonah really fear the Lord? And when he is finally exposed, when the sailors cast lots and the blame is clearly pinned on him, how does he respond?

Well, he urges the sailors to chuck him overboard. And that might sound very noble. But I hardly think this was completely an altruistic act. He hasn't shown much concern for the sailors' lives up until this point, or anyone else other than himself.

[10:40] He wanted absolutely nothing to do with God and his plan. And when we get to chapter 4, we'll see that Jonah was so angry with what God had called him to do, that he says he would rather die than participate in the work that God would have him do.

So does Jonah really fear the Lord? As the reader, I think we're left reeling at Jonah's hypocrisy. How can he say that he fears the Lord?

He talks the talk, but does he walk the walk? And we're left wondering how Jonah could be quite so petulant and inconsistent. Well, I think in order to unlock Jonah's psyche, we need to have a quick look at his ministry that he had back in Israel before he was called to preach judgment upon Nineveh.

And we read about this in 2 Kings chapter 14. Let me just read it for you. 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 the sin.

[12:03] That is, the king in Jonah's day hadn't taken down the golden calves that he commanded the people to go worship instead of worshiping in the temple. But nonetheless, Jeroboam restored the border of Israel from Lebo Hamath, as far as the sea of the Araba, 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 Hefer.

For the Lord saw the affliction of Israel was very bitter, but there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. So on the surface, I think it looks like Jonah had a pretty successful ministry in Israel and quite a comfortable time compared with most of the other prophets that we read about who generally got quite a raw deal.

I mean, Isaiah had to just preach at the people until they would never repent. He was at the center of a very positive, lucking project as Israel reclaimed land that was once lost to them.

which was prophesied all through Jonah. This was something that hadn't happened since the time of Solomon.

Israel had never taken any serious land back. It booked the trend of the general decline of Israel. So Jonah had a comfortable, successful ministry and he was really at the heart of things in Israel's success.

[13:34] Now put yourself in Jonah's shoes for a second. Wouldn't you be a bit miffed about having to leave this kind of work in order to preach judgment on a barbaric nation who were infamous in the ancient world for their monstrous acts?

It certainly isn't right how Jonah acts here in chapter 1 but I think both the people of Israel and us today can certainly find some area of contact with him, some area where we can empathize with him.

Israel, like Jonah, were in a very privileged position being God's people and seeing unprecedented success with the borders expanding despite their lack of spirituality, genuine spirituality.

Idolatry still went on in Israel but they saw success. they were happy to soak up the privileges of being God's people and give lip service to God but refuse to obey him.

when scrutinized under the microscope Israel were exactly like Jonah talking the talk making big confessions but not walking the walk picking and choosing when it was good for them.

[15:00] And I don't think we're too dissimilar are we not if we're honest with ourselves. We pick and choose when we'll obey God do we not? We make confessions about our God with our lips but we don't always back it up with our actions if we're honest.

We enjoy being God's privileged people enjoying sitting under his word every Sunday fellowshiping with one another and having a true and certain hope of the new creation.

But do we as a church or individually have any no-go areas? is there something that we simply could not give up if God called us to it?

Now I think we have given up a lot as a church. In the words of Hebrews as a church I think we can say we have joyfully accepted the plundering of our property since we knew that we had a better possession and an abiding one.

I think that we have made great sacrifices for the gospel over the last few years and that is wonderful and to be praised. But we need to ensure that we keep on doing that.

[16:17] And I think you'll admit that even though we do well in some areas I know in of myself there are some parts of me that I personally struggle with and I'm sure that you're the same.

I mean I'm much more secure and at home befriending people in church who are just like me and I find it rather difficult to talk to people who aren't like me and as a result I find slightly awkward.

And my word I would have kittens if Willie asked me to start a ministry like Tronet 2 or start a new street ministry. I'd find it utterly challenging and completely uncomfortable.

And no Willie that is not an invitation for you to help me to grow in godliness and safe. But we do need to be open to serving in whatever capacity is needed for the sake of God's kingdom and not just when it suits us.

If we're going to follow Jesus then he has to get our hearts our lives and our all. And we can't throw a tantrum if more is demanded of us than we would naturally want to give.

[17:26] Sometimes I think it's helpful to think about how our friends and our colleagues outside the church might perceive us. Do they see a people here community who use their privilege in order to bless others?

Who sacrifice their comfort for the sake of God's continuing work in the world? Or do they see a discrepancy in what we confess and how we live?

That's a question for us to ask of ourselves collectively as a church but of ourselves individually as well. Well our second point this evening is don't pick a fight you cannot win.

That was some sound advice that my grandad gave me when I was a little boy and as a result I've never been in a fight because there was never a fight I thought I could possibly win. But Jonah would have benefited greatly from this advice as would Israel and I think we would do well to listen to this advice to you today.

As the reader we're left in absolute disbelief are we not at Jonah's actions all the way through this chapter. You can't help thinking from the very off that this is not going to bode well for Jonah.

[18:46] From verse 3 onwards Jonah sets himself against the God who he claims in verse 9 is the one who made the sea and the dry land.

And yet this foolish man decides to run from the God of the sea by way of the sea and even the pagan sailors pick up on the stupidity of this in verse 10.

Up until this point Jonah had informed the sailors that he was fleeing from his God but I don't think the sailors had any concept of the sheer omnipotence and sovereignty of Jonah's God until he discloses the reach of God's power in verse 9.

Jonah's king Jonah's God is king over absolutely everything heaven land and sea. He is not some little God who just has dominion over a small piece of land or sea like the gods of the sailors.

Jonah's God is utterly different much bigger and sovereignly rules from heaven having absolute control over everything. And when the sailors hear this in verse 9 they're gobsmacked.

[19:58] Why would you disobey a God like that? Why would you run away from him? And God shows that he is not a God to fight against I think in three ways through this passage.

The storm the lots the casting of lots and the fish. Firstly we see just a fraction of God's power and sovereignty in verse 4 as he hurls up a storm in judgment over Jonah.

Terrifying and vast but as effortless for God as just making a splash in a bath. God is not going to let Jonah off the hook.

God is going to have his way with Jonah no matter what. He will bring the ship to the point of sinking if it means bringing about his plans for the world and conforming Jonah more into his image.

Secondly God ensures that the blame is fixed securely on Jonah. The sailors cast lots to work out who's at fault for the terror that they find themselves in and the lot sure enough lands on Jonah.

[21:13] Now we might be tempted to say well isn't that good that it landed on Jonah and not one of the sailors or they might have been thrown overboard but we need to remember Proverbs chapter 16 verse 33 God is even in control of the smallest of things like what side a dice lands on as well as the grand scale things like whipping up storms at sea and to finish it off God shows his absolute supremacy by swallowing either a pseudo suicidal Jonah or one who just doesn't learn his lessons very quickly up by a big fish and spitting him out on dry land showing that he is not a God to be messed with and the vomit stains I'm sure would have been a lasting reminder of that for Jonah but God didn't do all this out of delight and malevolence no God disciplined

Jonah very severely but he did so out of love like a parent disciplines his child God God was committed to Jonah and wanted him to grow more and more into his likeness and to have a part to play in his great redemptive story and little did Israel know but God would do the exact same thing with them Israel was just a feather weight matched up against the super heavy weight of the cosmos Israel would soon be humbled and brought to a point of usefulness again if they liked it or not and the most terrifying of disciplines was on the horizon for Israel for in just 20 to 30 years Assyria whose capital was Nineveh was going to roll in and flatten Israel there'd be next to nothing left God would inflict the most grievous of wounds to bring about faithfulness and his people and bring about his rescue plan

So this story was a stark warning to the people of Israel to stop playing games with their God Like Jonah they were not going to get away with their antics They had provoked the king of the universe to fight and there was no way they were going to win Now I think I must caveat at this point at this moment not every difficulty we face in this life is a judgment on God because of our disobedience but we should be aware that God can and certainly does work this way at times and I think this is a stark warning for us when we're playing games with God not offering him our full obedience he is not a God to be trifled with and he will send wind and storm and break us to the point of sinking to bring us to a point of obedience to conform us into his likeness and get us on board with his plan our God wounds in order to heal but surely surely we'd rather avoid the wounding altogether if we can would we not and is it not an attractive thing to be conformed into the image of this God a God who in chapter 4 is described as being completely other centered great and powerful yes but also abounding in steadfast love and kindness and mercy and grace so my advice would be to you tonight if you are caught up in some long standing sin that you have managed to convince yourself that

God is not all that interested in and is just happy for you to continue on as you are think again because whether you know it or not you're provoking the mighty warrior of heaven to battle and he will bring an end to your rebellion one way or another and surely it is wiser to repent today and vow to live rightly today rather than suffer the punches of a God who will knock you down in order to build you back up well a final point for this evening is this you must learn godliness from the pagans that's right you heard me right I'm not advocating copying everything the world around us does but here in Jonah chapter 1 we are encouraged to imitate the sailors and not Jonah because all through this passage Jonah creates a contrast between himself and the sailors and to be honest he's just utterly shown up by them isn't he there are three major contrasts made between the sailors and Jonah the first contrast we've looked at briefly already and that comes with their response to the storm Jonah was asleep in the boat in absolute apathy whereas the sailors recognized that the storm was a supernatural judgment and recognized that they needed to do something in order to avoid God's judgment secondly and linked with this the sailors respond appropriately to what has been revealed to them not only do they recognize that the storm is a judgment but when they hear Jonah's confession in verse 9 they inquire immediately as to what they must do in order for God to relent verse 11 they act rightly despite knowing very little about Jonah's God and offer sacrifices and vows immediately to the God they have just come to know as soon as they can whereas Jonah who had far greater access to

[27 : 17] God's self revelation and yet was very slow to obey and was utterly apathetic to God's judgment and discipline thirdly even when Jonah tells them of the solution to chuck him overboard in verse 12 the sailors show real concern for Jonah's life and concern not to displease God they would rather try and row back to land rather than murder someone in verse 13 and when they do finally come to the point when they have to admit defeat and have to throw Jonah over they pray beforehand don't they showing real reverence of the God of Israel whereas Jonah only begins to pray in chapter 2 and even then it's a pretty short sighted prayer as we'll look at next week skimming over his personal failures and painting himself in a rather favorable light so in the sailors we see

I think a people with very limited revelation of God but nonetheless people who are eager to make things right with God and show real reverence for him and urgency in worshipping him and this is summed up in the last and near the end of the chapter in the words they feared the Lord exceedingly this is what it means to fear the Lord what the sailors do not just empty words like Jonah in verse 9 well what's this all got to do with Israel well they like Jonah had lessons to learn from these pagan sailors they needed to act appropriately in light of what had been revealed to

them by God and they had to be quick to act eager to make things right with the God they had picked a fight with and worship him rightly once more for that is what it means to fear the Lord not just making pious sayings and going about things the way you want to and for Israel that would have meant tearing down these golden calves that they had set up on the high hills that they worshipped and putting away all other false gods like the Baals and recommencing true heartfelt worship of Yahweh whole life worship not just words of the God of heaven land and sea who abounds in steadfast love and mercy but history tells us that Israel did not learn this lesson in time despite Jonah writing them this account of his voyage to Nineveh God but will we will we be eager to put things right with God when we know we have wronged him will we be a church who act consistently with what God has revealed to us will we be quick to repent or will we just carry on in our sin that we refuse to give up presuming that

God doesn't really care about it and judgment really isn't coming no discipline is going to come my way God has very little time for hypocritical faith and empty confessions for all the time in the world for a response like that of the sailors others well to conclude if you are anything like me you'll find it very easy to identify with Jonah I think we're we've made the error of making Jonah into a kind of comical figure a caricature but we bear his resemblance more than we would like to admit we all love success and comfort and flinch at the mention of sacrifice and cost and none of our lives are fully consistent are they there is always some measure of discrepancy between what we confess and how we live so let's spend some time praying for God's help as we strive to be a church who doesn't pick and choose when to obey and let's not pick a fight with a

God who controls everything and will surely win in the end but rather let's learn from these sailors be quick to repent and truly revere the God who has revealed himself so kindly to us and get on board with his endeavors in this world let me pray for us Father God we confess that we are not as we ought to be we confess that there is far more darkness in us than we like to admit we admit that what people see of us on a Sunday is far from the reality of the depths of our hearts our confessions are far more grand than what we live up to in reality but we thank you God that you are kind and merciful and that you are a

[32 : 52] God who is committed to changing us and conforming us into your image and getting us on board on your redemptive plan which is a real privilege to be a part of so Father we pray that you would challenge us convict us help us to repent of the sin that we are so long standing in our life that we struggle to do away with that we might not have to face the punches of a God who will knock us down in order to build us back up into his likeness God love us and Lord help us not to be like Jonah enjoying our privilege and wanting nothing to do with your plans in this world but rather let us continue to be a church who's willing to sacrifice everything even a building on Buchanan Street remortgaging our houses in order for your ministry help us to continue to be that church to count the cost and have a part to play in your great plan for this world and we pray this in Jesus name

Amen