

Do you actually fear God?

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Date: 06 September 2017

Preacher: Andy Ritson

[0 : 00] Well, good afternoon everyone, and welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime Bible talk. We're just going to pray before we start, and then I'll read the passage for us.

Okay. Father God, we thank you for this time we can spend together around your word in the middle of a busy week. And we do pray that you'd speak clearly to us in this time, and transform us more into the image of your Son.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're going to be starting a mini-series in Jonah. And for the Tron folk here, sadly you're going to have it again.

But do bear with me. And we're going to be in Jonah chapter 1, which if you've got one of these big blue Bibles, you'll find on page 774. 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.

[1 : 19] 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 had 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 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?

[2 : 19] 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?

For the men knew that he was fleeing 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. He said to them, Pick me up and hurl me into the sea. Then the sea will quiet down for you, for I notice 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 its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

[3 : 32] 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. Well, I imagine most of us here this afternoon are familiar with the story of Jonah to some degree.

And I imagine our overriding memory of studying the book of Jonah was probably at Sunday school. There we probably learned not to be racists and to share the gospel with everybody, no matter who they are.

Well, that is a good lesson to learn, and is definitely an appropriate application from the book of Jonah. But I think that the book of Jonah cuts a little bit deeper than that. And if we're to make the most out of this series, we need to be asking ourselves all the time, why was this letter actually written? What was it that Jonah wanted the people of Israel to learn from this letter back in his day?

And why did he write such a damning account of himself to such a wide and general readership? Well, I'm convinced that Jonah wrote this book after he had learned some lessons.

[4 : 46] And he wrote this book because he wanted the people of Israel to learn those exact same lessons that he had learned. And Jonah wrote his story that Israel might see the ugliness of his behavior and see the exact same behavior in themselves.

And I think it's supposed to provoke that exact same reaction in us, too, that the Israelites would have felt. We're not supposed to stand back and judge Jonah for his actions and think that we're in some way above him.

No, we're supposed to recognize our propensity to be just like him and recognize that we, too, have some lessons that we need to learn.

And I think as we go along in this little mini-series, we'll find those lessons are quite revealing and uncomfortable. But hopefully they will also point us to our gracious God who can transform us into the people he wants us to be.

So let's delve right into chapter 1 and remember to put ourselves under examination 2 as we spend some time scrutinizing Jonah. Our first point for today is you should not pick and choose.

[5 : 58] Our walk with God cannot resemble that of a child in a pick-and-mick shop. We can't choose the things we like and ignore things that we don't like. The whole of this first chapter centers around Jonah's confession in verse 9.

In verse 9, Jonah claims that he fears the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. As a reader, we're kind of left scratching our heads, aren't we?

Because we know that Jonah has disobeyed God and wanted nothing to do with the task that he was called to, and has head off in the opposite direction to Tarshish. Well, we don't know where Tarshish is.

Some people say Spain. Some people say India. But what's important is the theological explanation that comes at the end of verse 3. He was fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

He wanted nothing to do with God or his plans to pronounce judgment upon Nineveh. So does Jonah really fear the Lord? And when the sailors are calling out in anguish to any pagan god who would be willing to listen to them, when the Lord hurled the storm against them, Jonah is just fast asleep in the bottom of the ship.

[7 : 13] Verse 5. The sailors were fearful of the God who sent the storm, though they did not know him by name yet. But Jonah didn't seem to care at all.

Completely ambivalent. So does Jonah really fear the Lord? And when Jonah is exposed, when the sailors cast lots and the blame is clearly pinned on him, how does he respond?

Well, yes, he urges the sailors to chuck him overboard. And at first glance, that looks quite noble. But when we get to chapter 4, we might see that this is not entirely an altruistic act.

Jonah was so angry with God for what he called him to do, that he would rather die than participate in the work he was called to.

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

[8 : 17] He talks the talk, but he doesn't seem to 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 think a little bit about what his ministry was like in Israel before he was called to Nineveh, which was a very terrifying task.

We're told about Jonah's ministry in 2 Kings chapter 14. Jonah was really at the heart of life in Israel, and Israel was prospering despite their ongoing sin and rebellion.

Jonah had prophesied that the boundaries of Israel would expand under the reign of Jeroboam II, and it happened. Life was good. It was at the heart of things.

He had a very successful ministry and quite a comfortable call compared to most of the prophets that we know about. Now, put yourself in Jonah's shoes just for a second.

Wouldn't you be just a little bit miffed to have to leave that kind of work, that positive-looking enterprise, to go preach judgment on a barbaric nation who were absolutely infamous in the ancient world for their monstrous acts?

[9 : 36] Would you want to leave that kind of work, to preach judgment on a city that is now modern-day Mosul? It certainly isn't right how Jonah acts, but I think the people of Israel back then and us all here today can certainly sympathize with him somewhat, can't we?

Israel, like Jonah, was happy to soak up the privileges of being God's people and would give lip service to God but refused to obey him.

When scrutinized under the microscope, Israel were exactly like Jonah, picking and choosing when to obey and when it was good for them.

And are we not a little bit similar? We too pick and choose when we obey God, do we not? We make confessions about God with our lips but don't back up our words with our actions.

We enjoy being God's privileged people, enjoy sitting under his word every Wednesday lunchtime and fellowshiping with one another and having a hope of eternity.

[10 : 45] But is there something that we simply could not give up if God called us to it? Now, no doubt there are many people here today who have given up a lot for the sake of the gospel and that is wonderful and should be praised but we need to ensure that we need to keep that going.

That we keep that going. For our tendency will always be to tend towards comfort and avoid suffering at all costs. 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 of us is demanded than we would like to give. Sometimes I think it's helpful to think about what our friends and family might think of us.

Do they see us as a people who use their privilege in order to bless others? Do they see a consistent people who sacrifice all comfort for the sake of God's work in his world?

Or do they see a discrepancy in what we confess and how we live? Our second point this afternoon is don't pick a fight you can't win.

[12 : 04] Now, that was sound advice that my granddad taught me when I was a little boy and as a result, I've never ever been in a fight because there was never been a fight I thought I could possibly win.

But Jonah would have benefited from this advice too, wouldn't he? As would Israel. And I think we would do well to listen to this advice today. As the reader, we are left in absolute disbelief at Jonah's actions all the way through this first chapter.

You can't help thinking right from the off that this is not going to end well for Jonah. From verse 3 onwards, Jonah sets himself against a God who he claims in verse 9 is the one who made the sea and the dry land everything.

And yet this foolish man decides to run from this God by way of the sea, knowing fine well that God controls the sea. And even the pagan sailors pick up on the stupidity of this move in verse 10.

Jonah's God is king over absolutely everything. Heaven, land and sea. He is not some little God who has dominion over a small little domain like the gods of the pagans.

[13 : 19] No, Jonah's God is utterly different. Much bigger and sovereignly rules from heaven having absolute control over absolutely everything. And when the sailors hear this, well, they're gobsmacked, aren't they?

Why would you disobey a God like that? And God shows that he is not a God to be messed with in three ways, I think, through this passage.

First, the storm. Second, the lots. And third, the fish. Firstly, we see God's power and sovereignty in verse 4 as he hurls up a storm in judgment on Jonah.

Terrifying and vast. Enough to put these seasoned sailors in absolute fear and frenzy. But as effortless for God as just making a splash in the bath.

God is not going to let Jonah off the hook. 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 likeness.

[14 : 27] Secondly, God ensures that the blame is securely fixed on Jonah. The sailors cast lots to work out who's at fault for this terror that's come upon them.

And the lot lands on Jonah. Now, we might be tempted to think, well, that's a good coincidence, isn't it? It's a good job he didn't land on one of the sailors and they got chucked overboard. But as Proverbs 16.33 reminds us, the lot is cast in the lap, but every decision is from the Lord.

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 conducting what happens in the heavens and the land and the seas.

Thirdly, to finish off, God shows his absolute supremacy by swallowing a pseudo-suicidal Jonah up by a big fish and spitting him out on dry land to do the work he wants him to do.

But God didn't do all this, these three things, with delight or out of malevolence. No, God disciplined Jonah severely, but he did so out of love, like a parent disciplines a child.

[15:43] God was committed to Jonah. And wanted him to grow more into his likeness and to play a part in his great redemptive story. And little did Israel know at the time, but God would do the exact same thing with them.

Israel was just a featherweight matched up against the super heavyweight of the cosmos. Israel would soon be humbled and brought to a point of usefulness 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' time, Assyria, whose capital was Nineveh, was going to roll in and flatten Israel.

God would inflict the most grievous of wounds to bring about faithfulness in his people. So, this story was a stark warning to the people of Israel back then 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 that they were ever going to win.

[16:52] Now, I must caveat what I'm saying at this point. Not every difficulty we face in life is a judgment from God due to our disobedience.

But we should be aware that God can indeed work in this way. And if that is the case, then this should be a stark warning to us too when we are playing games with God, not offering him our full obedience.

He is not a God to be trifled with, and he will send wind, storm, whatever, to break us and bring us to the point of obedience again.

Our God wounds in order to heal, but surely, surely we would rather avoid the wounding altogether if we can, would we not? And is it not an attractive thing to be conformed more into the image of a God like this, a God who is completely other-centered and is determined to make his steadfast love made known to people like the Ninevites and the sailors in this chapter.

So my advice would be to you, if you are caught up in some long-standing sin and you've managed to convince yourself that God doesn't really care all that much about it, well, think again.

[18:16] 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 like the sailors rather than suffer the punches of a God who will knock you down if he has to in order to build you back up again.

Our final point for this afternoon is this. You must learn godliness from the pagans. Now, I am not advocating copying everything that the world around us does, but here in Jonah 1, we are encouraged to imitate the sailors rather than Jonah because Jonah seems to contrast himself with them all the way through, and he is utterly shown up by them.

There are three major contrasts made between the sailors and Jonah. The first contrast comes in their response to the storm, which we have looked at briefly already.

Jonah was fast asleep in the bottom of the boat in apathy and ambivalence, 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.

Verse 5. Secondly, and link with this, the sailors respond appropriately to what is revealed to them. Not only do they recognize that the storm is a judgment, but when they hear Jonah's confession in verse 9 about who God is, they inquire immediately as to what they must do in order for God to relent.

[19:53] Verse 11. They act rightly, despite knowing very little about Jonah's God, and offer sacrifices and vows to the God they have just come to know.

Whereas Jonah, he had far greater access to God's self-revelation, didn't he? And yet he was very slow to obey and was apathetic towards God's judgment and his discipline.

Thirdly, even when Jonah tells them of the solution to chuck him overboard in verse 12, they show genuine concern for Jonah's life and are careful not to displease God.

They would rather try and row back to land than murder someone, verse 13. And when they do come to the point where they admit defeat and have to throw Jonah overboard, they pray

beforehand, showing real reverence of the God of Israel.

Whereas Jonah, well, he only begins to pray in chapter 2 when he's in the sea. And even then, it's a pretty short-sighted prayer, skimming over his personal failures and painting himself in a rather favorable light.

[21 : 06] So in the sailors, we see a people with very limited revelation of who God is, but yet people who are eager to make things right with him and show real reverence for him and to worship him.

And this is summed up in the last verse. They genuinely feared the Lord exceedingly. That is what it means to fear the Lord. Not just empty words like Jonah's in verse 9.

So what had this got to do with Israel? Well, Israel, like Jonah, had lessons to learn from these pagan sailors. They needed to act appropriately in light of God's self-disclosure about himself.

And they had to be quick to act and eager to make things right with a God they had picked a fight with and worship him rightly once more. Well, that is what it means to fear the Lord.

Not just making pious sayings and then doing what you want. And for Israel, that would have meant tearing down the golden calves that they were worshipping in Israel, putting away Baal and the other foreign gods and recommencing true, heartfelt worship of their God of heaven, land, and sea.

[22 : 22] But history tells us that they didn't do that. They didn't learn that lesson in time. So will we? Will we learn from their mistakes? Will we be eager to put things right with God when we know we have wronged him?

Will we be a people who act consistently with what God has revealed to us? Well, to conclude, if you are anything like me, you will find it very easy to be just like Jonah.

We bear his resemblance more than we would like to admit. We all love success and comfort and being at the heart of things like Jonah was in Israel. And we flinch at the mention of sacrifice and cost.

None of our lives are fully consistent. I'll admit that. there is always some measure of discrepancy between what we confess and how we live. So let's pray for God's help as we strive to be a people who don't pick and choose when to obey.

And let's not pick a fight with a God who controls everything and is bound to win, but rather learn from the sailors to repent quickly and truly revere this God who has revealed himself to us and get on board with his endeavors in this world.

[23 : 46] Let me quickly pray for us. Father God, we desperately need your help.

We tend towards comfort and selfishness and apathy more than we would like to admit. help us to have your concerns, Lord.

Change us into a people who care about your plans in this world and who want to be like you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.