

Jonah 1:1-3

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[0 : 00] Well, on Christmas Eve, our next-door neighbour, who we know very well, came round, rang! on our door and said, my husband's ill, she can't drive, I need to pick up some groceries,! could I get a ride with you guys? So, my wife Julie let Melissa get in the car with our daughter Zoe, they headed off to Tesco and came back so four hours later or whatever it took on Christmas Eve with the things that Melissa needed. We were very happy to help her, she's a good friend, she and her husband Jeremy, so it was nice to be able to do something for them when we got that request. However, if Dan, our postman, had knocked on our door that morning and said, can you help, I need to pick up some groceries from Tesco's, we would probably have said, can't do that. Not that we got anything against Dan, but all we know about him is, his name is Dan and he delivers our post. We don't have a relationship other than a kind of thank you and signing for parcels. So, some people it's appropriate to get requests from. Some, it just, it feels like they're crossing a boundary. And I think all of us have those kind of boundaries, those limitations we put on relationships, that there are some people we do almost anything for, and there are some people, not because we don't like them, but just because of the relationship, we won't do some things for. Do you know what

I mean? Well, I wonder, do we ever put limits, do we ever put boundaries on what we will let God ask of us? Do we ever put boundaries on what the living God can say to us? Jonah did.

I expect most of us, at times, are like Jonah. I want to look at two things today. I want to look at Jonah's past service and Jonah's present flight. Look at his past service so we can get some idea of who this man is, the context which God spoke to him. So, if you've got your fingers there in 2 Kings chapter 14, we're going to look at this very briefly. Now, truth to tell, we don't know if this was Jonah's past. The Bible doesn't give us clear chronology here.

We don't know if Jonah's message that Israel's borders would expand became before or after he was sent to Nineveh. I think there's good reason to assume it was before, because in the book of Jonah we don't get any other introduction of the prophet's calling, and it certainly seems to assume he already is a prophet. So, I think it's reasonable, even if it's not definite, to assume that what's recorded in 2 Kings chapter 14 is something that happened earlier in Jonah's life. Now, Jonah lived in a terrible time in many ways. It was a time of apostasy in Israel.

It was a time when there was a bad king, Jeroboam II, on the throne. If you look at 2 Kings 14, verse 24, this is what we hear about Jeroboam. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

[3 : 06] He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. So, there's a time when no one was really worshipping the living God. There's a time when there was all sorts of corruption, all sorts of evil going on. You get a hint of that in the book of Amos.

And yet, what was the message Jonah had to give to the king and to the people? Verse 25. Hear what Jonah's message was for the people. It was this. You're going to get bigger. You're going to get the land restored to you. The land that you've lost through your lack of faith, through your rebellion against God, God is going to restore that land to you. Jonah was a lucky man, really, wasn't he? It must have been great to be a prophet who could give a positive message. Yes, life's going to get better. You're going to win. That was Jonah's message. It must have been great to be a prophet. And that message was actually a message of God's undeserved goodness. You can see that if you look down to verse 26. Why did God expand the borders? Well, certainly not because the people were good. But here's the reason.

Verse 26. For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, and 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 Jehoash, by the hand of this unworthy man who led the nation into rebellion against God. See, Jonah had a message of grace, of God's undeserved goodness for his own people.

And that was Jonah's past experience. And as a prophet, his prophecy proved true. What a privilege for Jonah. God spoke to him. Jonah proclaimed the message. The message came true. It proved that he really was a prophet. He had this genuine experience of God and his word and God's gracious message for his people. He had the joy of God using him. So that was Jonah's past. I wonder, what does your past look like? What does my past look like?

[5 : 30] I mean, perhaps you're here today because you have an interest in finding out what Christianity is about. Perhaps you have very little or no past experience of Christianity. In which case, it's great you're here. And you have a privilege as well. Because the Bible tells us that when we hear the Bible read, when we hear God's word taught, we're hearing God speak, just as Jonah did. Just like Jonah, we face a choice of how to respond. So I'm glad you're here if you have little or no experience of Christianity at all. Do please ask questions at the end. Do come along to Christianity Explored on Thursday if you can. Think things through.

I'd love to meet up with you and talk about it more. I guess for others of us, we've perhaps been Christians for a long time. Maybe in the past we've known great times of being used by God, as Jonah was. Perhaps in our churches. Perhaps as a witness in our workplaces or with our families. We've seen God work. The question for us is, what do we do with those past experiences? Are they fuel for our prayers that God will in his goodness and grace and mercy use us again? Or do we do what Jonah did? And with this, we turn from Jonah's past service to Jonah's present flight. So if you could turn to page 935 and Jonah chapter 1. Let's look briefly at what Jonah did. Because his past service was not an encouragement to future service, but quite the reverse.

So Jonah 1 verse 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.

[7 : 11] See, once again, God's word is coming to Jonah. And he's got a message to preach. And he's being sent to Nineveh, a long way away. One of the great cities of the Assyrian Empire, on the east bank of the Tigris River, opposite what is today Mosul, in modern Iraq.

That's where Jonah was sent. Now, if you'd never read the story before, what would you expect to happen next? When I was growing up, I used to love to watch a question of sport, a quiz program. And one of the rounds on a question of sport was, what happens next? Where they'd play a bit of action, and stop it, and the teams would have to figure out what happens next. Well, we'd play that game with Jonah. What happens next? He's a prophet. God's word has come to him. God said, Arise, go.

What's he going to do? Well, he arises, and he goes. But look at verse 3. But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish, from the presence of the Lord.

From where Jonah was, Nineveh was off in the east. Tarshish, southern Spain, the end of the Mediterranean, was as far away in the opposite direction as possible.

[8 : 17] And Jonah went there in a rush. That's the implication. He arose and went, and fled. That was his flight. And there are two elements to this flight that I want us to see.

Firstly, he disobeyed God's word. He did exactly the opposite of what he was told. And secondly, he was distancing himself from God's service. So you can see he disobeyed God's word because he did exactly the opposite of what he was told.

He went west instead of east. And we're not told a reason why. We get a hint as to why when we get to chapter 4. But here we're not told why.

And the reason for that is the fact of Jonah's disobedience is more important than the excuse for Jonah's disobedience. The fact of his disobedience is more important, not the excuse for it.

Now I don't know about you, but I'm very good at coming up with reasons for disobeying. Reasons for just ignoring or evading God's word sometimes. I shouldn't get angry with my children, but I'm tired, I'm under pressure.

[9 : 23] Does it really matter, for example? Or, we should be giving to the Lord's work, but finances are a bit tight in this climate. Maybe we should just hold back.

There are excuses for actually we're choosing, like Jonah, to disobey. Now most of us don't reject God's word as obviously as Jonah did.

Most of us don't do exactly the opposite. But I think there are at least three ways in which I see in my own life I'm prone to disobey. And I suspect it might be true of all of this. The three ways I think I do it are procrastination, rationalisation, and limitation.

If I can put it like that. So the first way I disobey is through procrastinating, procrastination. I hear, as I did in the sermon the other week, that if I love people I will speak hard words to them where they need to be rebuked.

Or I hear a sermon about finances and money. I think, yes, I need to address my giving. But then I just don't go around to doing it.

[10:29] I just put it off and put it off. Now if you had a dog, and you called your dog to come to you, and it sort of ambled up five minutes later, would your dog have obeyed you?

When I ask my daughter to clear away her pens so we can have dinner, and she sits there and keeps drawing, is she obeying me?

No. Obeying means doing what we're told, when we're told. If we only do it when it's convenient, then who ultimately are we obeying? Who ultimately are we serving?

It's ourselves, isn't it? So sometimes I procrastinate. Sometimes I rationalise. I rationalise my disobedience. So we're told to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

And yet how easy is it? To just think, well, surely that doesn't include this very difficult person. Surely it doesn't include praying for those who go and destroy villages in Nigeria, or shoot journalists in France.

[11:37] So I start to limit, sort of rationalise, and I'll take away my disobedience. Or a third way is through limitation, through limiting what we'll hear, through selective hearing.

My daughter has had lots of ear infections, and there are times when her hearing is really not very good at all, and she just doesn't hear things. And so there are times we'll say, Zoe, can you put your pens away so we can start having dinner?

And she actually won't hear. On the other hand, there are times when she doesn't hear that, but you say in a slightly quieter voice, if you put them away now, you can have some ice cream for dessert. At which point the pens suddenly go away. Amazing. Selective listening. We'll listen to the things we want. And that's true of my daughter, and I think she probably gets it from me. But isn't it true of all of us?

There might be some areas of life where we say, I've got to hear God on that. I'm not going to hear him challenge me on my relationships. I'm not going to hear him challenge me on where I'm spending my time.

[12:41] I'm not going to hear him challenging me on loving that difficult person next to me. And so he placed limits on God. I think of a friend of mine who about ten years ago was very committed to his church.

He had a little accountability group, a bunch of guys he'd pray with, I think on a weekly basis. And he was very committed to those things. But whilst he was praying with those guys, he was also sleeping with a woman he wasn't married to.

He was having an affair with someone else in his office, cheating on his wife. What was happening? He was suffering from a sort of selective hearing, limiting God, limiting what God could say to him, not being challenged over the adultery.

It was like you put a boundary there. God, you cannot step over this boundary. I'm not going to hear you. And yet the Lord is a God who does not have boundaries.

Look again at verse 2. Why does the Lord send Jonah to Nineveh? Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

[13:45] The Lord is the God of the whole earth, the judge of the whole earth. He wasn't just in Israel. He knew what was happening in a city thousands of miles away. Yet Jonah tried to limit God.

He disobeyed God's word. If we're honest with ourselves, it's often not the parts of the Bible that we find hard to understand, that we have difficulty with, is it? It's the parts we do understand very clearly, we have difficulty with.

That's what Jonah's problem was. There's no difficulty understanding God's word. He just didn't want to do it. He disobeyed God's word. I should say my friend who was committing adultery is thankfully back with his wife.

Things have been restored and that's good. But he was limiting God at the time. Well, it was Jonah disobeying God's word. But also he was distancing himself from God's service.

Look at verse 3. There's a phrase that appears twice there. Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

[14:53] See the repeated phrase? Jonah was trying to get away. He was distancing himself from God's service. Now, probably Jonah knew he couldn't actually escape from God's presence.

As Psalm 139 puts it, Where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.

There is no escaping the God of the Bible. And Jonah probably knew that in his heart of hearts. So what was he trying to do? He was trying to distance himself from God's service.

A previous prophet, Elijah, in 1 Kings 17, had described himself as one who stands before the face of the Lord, stands in the presence of the Lord.

It's the same phrase used here. Elijah said that as he was speaking God's message. It meant, I am living in God's presence as God's servant.

[15:54] I am serving him. So Jonah was seeking to flee from the presence of the Lord. He was trying to distance himself from God's service. He said, I'll take my P-45. I'm out of here, God.

I've done my bit. I'm not doing any more. That's what he was saying. And look what happened as Jonah tried to distance himself, as he tried to get away. Can you imagine how Jonah would have told the story to us?

So I wanted to get away, so I went down to Joppa, and I really wanted to go to Tarshish. And guess what? I pushed on that door, and it opened. I found a boat.

They had a space for me. I had exactly the amount of money I needed in my pocket so I could pay and get on that boat. It looks like it was meant to be, doesn't it?

If you look down to verse 5, it's even better than that, because in the midst of a storm, at the very end of verse 5, that's a little bit further down, we read that Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

[16:57] See, Jonah had deep inner peace about this decision to run away from God, to distance himself from God's service and to disobey God's word. Even the violent storm that everyone else feared couldn't shake his inner peace.

See, there's a dangerous business when we start to distance ourselves from the Lord's service.

There's a friend I knew, a guy I knew, a few years ago. He was a deacon in a church.

He worked for a Christian mission organisation and he was married. He had two daughters who were coming up their teenage years and he was a lovely guy. But one day he announced that they were leaving the church.

I was never quite sure the reasons why. I think they wanted to go somewhere slightly more local, which is fair enough. But a couple of years after that, he announced he was going to leave his job with a Christian mission organisation because he wanted to be involved in secular employment so he could actually meet some people who didn't know Jesus, so he could be a light and an ambassador in his workplace.

Again, that sounded reasonable. It was probably only about two years after that that it was discovered that he was leaving his wife and moving in with another man somewhere with whom he was having a relationship.

[18:09] You see what he was doing? As we look back and see at each stage he was distancing himself from the Lord's service and increasingly disobeying God's word.

Primarily by being unfaithful to his marriage vows, unfaithful to his wife and family. See, often the very first sign of the rebellion in our hearts is that distancing ourselves from the Lord's service or distancing ourselves from God's people.

So can I ask you, what is your attitude to serving God? For those of us who have a job as we go into our workplaces, do we feel like we're serving God then? Do we go to do our work as those serving the Lord Jesus?

Do we go conscious that the living God has called you, made you his own through the death and resurrection of his son? Or do you just say, well, this is my work.

This isn't church. This is my work. Here I'm going to blend in. Here I'm going to strive to do my best to advance up the ladder. I'll do whatever it needs, whatever I need to do to fit in.

[19:15] How do you feel about serving God? Do you feel serving in the church? Or do you naturally think, I'm too busy, or I've got nothing to offer. I won't do that.

It's a great heart check, isn't it? Are we distancing ourselves from God's service? Are we disobeying God's word? This was Jonah's flight. Disobedience and distancing himself.

Maybe he thought he'd done his bit in the past. After all, he had a successful preaching career in Israel. He didn't want another one now. What about us?

Are we disobeying God's word? The things where he's challenged us, and we're putting it off, or rationalizing it away, or limiting it, saying, God, don't talk to me about that.

Maybe it relates to family, maybe it relates to work, maybe it relates to lots of things. It's all part of, could all be part of our flight from God like James. But there is good news, as we'll see as this series goes on.

[20 : 18] Because this great God is a God who is compassionate and full of steadfast love. He's a God who sent his own son to seek and to save what was lost, to seek and to save those who were disobeying his word and distancing themselves from his service.

The Lord Jesus came to die for people like us, who are running from God naturally, and who need God's forgiveness. He came to die and rise again, to bring us back, so instead of running from God, we can run to God and know his forgiveness and mercy.

So if you know in your heart that you're like Jonah, and you're on the run, can I beg you to look at Jesus and turn around and come home. Let's pray.