

# Jonah 1

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[ 0 : 00 ] According to Gershwin, the things that you're liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so. Now of course, Gershwin wasn't a great theologian. I'm sure he wrote some good songs. But I have to agree with him in this particular instance.

Because when it comes to the story of Jonah and the whale, which everybody knows so well, it ain't necessarily so. The Bible doesn't actually say there was a whale. It just says there was a great fish. And we don't really know what the fish was. I know what it's become. It's become a massive red herring. Because people go chasing after the whale and they miss the whole point, don't they, of the story of Jonah.

And the story of Jonah is very powerful and very relevant to doing ministry in a borough like ours. Let's forget about the fish for a moment and focus on what this story is really about.

I think if Jonah was here tonight, he would want to say to us, the Lord has done great things for me. He sent a great storm. He prepared a great fish. And he saved a great city.

[ 1 : 14 ] The city of Nineveh. Which, if you're on social media, you'll remember, wouldn't you, about a couple of years ago, there were all those symbols. Do you remember the symbol? Kind of, Arabic symbol, isn't it?

Kind of, sort of a smiley face with two dots. You'll know what I mean. It was, it began in the city of Mosul. Do you remember that? We know it today. That is the ancient city of Nineveh.

It was the sign that Islamic states were putting on the doors of Christians. In the ancient city of Nineveh. And many kind of Christians adopted it. And put it on their homepage.

Or put it on their profile. It was done to mark out those who were to be killed or persecuted. Or just driven out of town. Town of Nineveh.

And so it's still a frightening place. But nowhere near what it was in the days of Jonah. So let's look at these three things. First of all, the great storm. Can you see verse 4?

[ 2 : 13 ] The Lord hurled a violent storm into the sea. It's a great translation. It's like a violent javelin. That's what the word means.

So here is Jonah. He is running away from God. And God gets him in his sight. And he hurls this javelin. He hurls the storm into the sea at the boat where Jonah is trying to run away from God.

The hound of heaven is after him. And he's running away as fast as his little legs will carry him.

Look what it says in the opening verses. 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. But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Jobba and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down to it to go with them to Tarshish.

Away from the presence of the Lord. God said, go to Nineveh. It's about 600 miles to the east of where Jonah was. And what Jonah did is he turned around and he went 2,000 miles to the west.

[ 3 : 20 ] To near Gibraltar or somewhere near there. He went as far west as it was possible to go in the then known world. He does what the psalmist says in 1.3.9.

Psalms 1.3.9. If you remember, he tries to go as far as east is from the west. He travels to get away from the presence of the Lord. He's trying to put as much distance between himself and God's call on his life as possible.

So we're told in verse 3, at that last sentence, he paid the fare, went down to it to go with them to Tarshish. Away from the presence of the Lord. And he went down to Jobba.

And he found a ship. Let's go to Tarshish. It's convenient, isn't it? So he pays the fare. He's got the right money on him. And he went down into the ship to go with them to Tarshish.

Away from the presence of the Lord. It's actually repeated twice in verse 3. And that's what he's doing. That's his aim. To go away from the presence of the Lord.

[ 4 : 20 ] You can imagine the scene, can't you? Down at the docks there in Jobba. As Jonah goes through customs. Name. Jonah. Occupation. Profit. Reason for travel. Running away from the Lord.

And that is what is happening here in this chapter. And as the story unfolds, it's like the great status quo song. Down, down, down, down.

Verse 3. Says he went down to Jobba. It says he got into the boat and went down into it. Verse 5. It tells us that he went down. Down into the below the decks. He goes to sleep. He goes down into the sea. We're told in chapter 2.

In verse 6 of chapter 2. It says he sank down to the roots of the mountains. Isn't it? I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever. The world under the sea.

[ 5 : 16 ] And then he goes down the gullet of a great fish. Down into the belly of a monster of the deep. It's quite a come down for a prophet. For a prophet of the Lord, a man, and God.

That is what happens. And that is what happens when you run for the presence of the Lord. It's downhill all the way. And isn't it interesting? When you want to run away from God. Isn't it interesting? There's always a ship in the dock ready to go.

There's always a ship in the port ready to sail. Spurgeon speaks in one of his sermons about a man who had a real problem. With his temper. And whenever he lost his temper he would throw things. And Spurgeon says of the man. The real wonder is not that he lost his temper. Or that he threw things. But whenever he lost his temper there was always something on hand to throw. And the devil will always help us on our way.

When we're running away from God. And that's how it is. Isn't it? That's how it was with Jonah. He's running away from God's will for his life. And it just so happens that there down in the docks is a ship. In Joppa waiting to take him to where he wants to go.

[ 6 : 17 ] There always is. He's got the right money in his pocket for the fare. And it may well be that Jonah is tempted to rationalise this. In terms of the providence of God.

Well surely it can't be a coincidence. You know the sort of things people say. I know that God's word says for example. That we should not be unequally yoked with an unbeliever.

I know that God's word says that I shouldn't go out with a non-Christian. But you know the circumstances in which we've met. And we have been put together. They are so unlikely. They are so remarkable.

I really feel. That God has brought us together. Have you heard that? I've heard that. And once you start talking like that. You are well on the way. From God's presence.

And once you start talking like that. You are in real danger of backsliding. Once you stop reading the Bible. And start misreading God's providence.

[ 7 : 12 ] You'll really see. And God may well have to send a great storm in your life. Not to destroy you. But to bring you back to where you belong. He knows the way to bring you back.

So look what happens in this great storm. God hurls this great storm at Jonah. And verse 5. Then the mariners were afraid. And each cried out to his God.

The small g. 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 laid down. And was fast asleep.

So the captain came and said to him. Why do you. What do you mean you sleeper. Arise. Call out to your God. Now I don't want you to miss the irony here. What is the book of Jonah.

The book of Jonah is a satirical book. And in some ways actually. As you study it. The book of Jonah is a very funny book. And tragically sad. At the same time.

[ 8 : 09 ] You see. Jonah. Isn't running away from God. Because he's afraid to go to Nineveh. I don't think that. I think most of us would be afraid. I don't think most of us would want to go to Mosul now.

It was far worse then though. But the interesting thing is. And I don't want to give the end of the book away too much. But as you read the book of Jonah. It becomes pretty obvious. That the reason is. He is running away.

Is not because he is afraid to go to Nineveh. Even though Nineveh was a very scary place. The Assyrians were Israel's sworn enemies. And they were a wild and brutal bunch of people.

Every bit as cruel and barbaric as he is in our state. But it wasn't that he was afraid. And as you read the book. You'll discover that he wasn't running away. Because he was afraid of failure.

It's a pretty big gig isn't it. It's a huge task that God was wanting him to do. He was calling this lone prophet. This Hebrew prophet. To walk down the main street of the most powerful city on earth. [ 9 : 03 ] And call on that city to get down on its knees. Before the God of Israel. What are the chances of that happening? I think we've got a pretty big job to reach Ealing. There's quite a lot of us here.

What are the chances of one solitary Hebrew prophet. In the Assyrian capital. Walking down the street. Calling on the people to repent. And bow down before Yahweh. Not their God. But the God of Israel. The God who made the sky and the sea and the land. It doesn't look like it's going to happen. Does it? But as we see. Jonah wasn't afraid of that either. It wasn't the city itself. It wasn't failure. He was a prophet of the Lord. What was he scared of? And this will give the show away. But otherwise you won't be able to understand the irony of this. He was afraid. What he was afraid of was not failure. But success. And that becomes obvious when you get to chapter 4. It's really in your face in chapter 4. The last thing that Jonah wants to do is to go to Nineveh and preach to a bunch of pagans.

[ 10 : 05 ] That's the last thing he wants to do. And that is the irony of what is happening in the storm. Do you see what happens? God puts him right back into the situation that he's trying to run away from.

It's not that he's a coward. He's a bigot. That's his problem. Jonah is a racist. He doesn't want to see the Nineveh bow before the God of Yahweh.

And that's what he's afraid of. And the irony of the whole situation is he gets on a boat and he's running away. And God throws this storm at him. And in the middle of the storm suddenly he finds himself on board a ship full of pagans.

Who are crying out to their gods. He's in the very situation that he's trying to run away from. And reluctantly, amazingly, Jonah has to give his testimony in verse 9.

Who says God doesn't have a sense of humour? Here's Jonah, the reluctant prophet, the unwilling evangelist, and he's forced to evangelise against his will.

[ 11 : 10 ] And the sailors are terrified. You see that in verses 4-6. Again, they are used to storms, aren't they? They are sailors. So this must have been a big storm.

And they are absolutely terrified. They are Phoenician sailors. And they are used to storms at sea. And they start to throw the cargo overboard. It's a cargo vessel. And they are about to jettison the cargo.

And the ship threatens to break in pieces. Even that is funny. You can almost hear the ship saying, If you don't stop this, I'm going to break in pieces. The ship threatens to break in pieces.

And Jonah, where is Jonah in all this? He's fast asleep at the bottom of the boat. Look at verse 6. The pagan captain.

This pagan sailor. The captain of this Phoenician vessel. Approached him and said, What are you doing, O sleeper? Get up. And call to your God. And maybe this God.

[ 12 : 10 ] Maybe this God. Will give a thought to us. That we may not perish. This pagan. Says to the prophet of God. How can you sleep while we are perishing?

Don't you care? Do you see the irony? How can we sleep while we are perishing? Don't you care? Here, if I can put it this way.

Here is the church being rebuked by the world. Do you see? Here is God's prophet being shown up by a bunch of pagans. I am a Hebrew. Verse 9.

And I fear the Lord God of heaven. I worship Yahweh. When you see that word Lord in capital letters in the Bible. It is Yahweh. That is his name. They have been calling on their gods.

With a small g. And they had lots of different gods. And they did not know which god was which. They just in a panic are being superstitious. And they were calling on their various gods.

[ 13 : 09 ] And then Jonah reluctantly has to give his testimony. And he says, I worship Yahweh. The God of the heavens who made the sea. And the dry land.

And there he is sleeping like a baby. And at the same time running away from God. He suppressed his conscience. Isn't that interesting?

You can run away from God. You can suppress your conscience. And sleep like a baby. You can disobey God.

And yet have peace about it. He is there sleeping in the boat. When he should in fact be preaching and witness. And it is almost as if he said, I am done with this. Just wake me up when it is all over.

I don't know whether you feel or sometimes feel like that. I often do. Sometimes you just want to escape some or other. Even some of our theology. Some of our longing for the return of the Lord. Is nothing more than escapism. Wake me up when it is all over.

[14:10] I can't cope with the world as it is now. I can't cope with my responsibility to bring the knowledge of God to the city. Wake me up when it is all over. Matthew Parris is a writer for the Times.

He is an atheist. He is no friend to Christianity. But he wrote an article for the Times several years ago. Which was a very good summary of Christian faith. He is not a Christian. But he does know what the gospel is.

And he finished up with these words. If I believed that. Or even a tenth of that. How could I care. Which version of the prayer book was being used. I drop my job.

Sell my house. Throw away my possessions. Leave my acquaintances. And set out into the world. Burning with a desire to know more and more. And when I found out more to act upon it.

And to tell it to others. Far from being puzzled that the Mormons and the Sam's Day Adventists. Should knock on my door. I am unable to understand. And how anyone who believes what is written in the Bible. Could choose to spend his working hours in any other endeavour.

[15:11] How it should be motivated by compassion. Jesus saw people as sheep without a shepherd. So that's the challenge for us here. If you know the true and the living God.

If you know Yahweh. The God who has revealed himself. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. If you know the supreme sovereign God. Who made the sky and the air and the dry ground. Well it's high time.

It's next to awake from our sleep. Isn't that what Paul said in Romans 13. It's high time to awake. Because your salvation is nearer now. Than when you first believed.

The returning of Jesus is growing near. He is coming back. And time is rolling on. It's high time for the church to awake from their sleep. And I believe that the great need we have in the Christian church here in the UK.

Is an awakening. It's an awakening. We believe the right things. We see these eternal realities. And we believe them.

[16:11] And we debate them. And we discuss them. But we're half asleep. And half awake. And so we believe that people that don't know Jesus. Will be lost eternally.

But it doesn't drive us to our knees. We have a prayer meeting on Wednesday. There should be double the amount of folks that are normally there.

The people around your house. And your workplace. Are going hell. And it should drive us to our knees. That we should be pleading with God to visit this borough.

And bring salvation to this place. Isn't it high time we awoke out of our sleep. Because Jesus is coming back. And what on earth are we going to say to him when he turns up.

But that. But not only is that a challenge to us. To take our Christianity seriously. Especially in the days in which we live. But it's also a very great comfort to know.

[17:08] That for those who do not yet know God. And there are. Aren't there hundreds of thousands around this place. That don't know God. God has a heart for the lost. And God has a heart for Nineveh.

The unspeakable things that we know that IS have done in Morser. Well it was just like that in Nineveh. And God had a heart for that city. The cruel barbaric city.

And he is determined to save the people of that city. And he is determined to send his messenger to that city. And so this story. Is ironic. It's satirical. It's challenging.

But at the same time. It is full of hope. Isn't it look at verse 14. They called out. To the Lord. Which Lord.

Did they call out to? They've been calling out to their gods. But now they call out to the Lord. To Yahweh. They've heard Jonah's testimony. And now.

[18:07] They're calling on Jonah's God. Don't let us perish. Because of this man's life. Don't charge us. With innocent blood. And they pick up Jonah.

And they throw him. And the rest into the sea. They hurl him. Same word. Same word as. The storm was hurled. As the same way. They hurl Joseph.

Jonah into the sea. And the sea seeks from its raging. And then the men feared the Lord exceedingly. And they offered a sacrifice to the Lord. And made vows.

We're meant to see. The irony here. Here is Jonah. The reluctant prophet. And his heart is certainly not in this. He doesn't want it to happen. He's running away. No missionary society. Would ever send Jonah to the mission field.

And Jonah of course. Would never apply in the first place. And yet everyone who comes into contact with Jonah. Turns to the Lord. First a boat full of sailors.

[19:08] And then 120,000 souls. In the pagan city of Nineveh. And they all turn to God. Through the preaching of this reluctant prophet. The unwilling evangelist. That's the first point.

Second or quicker. Let's move from the great storm to the great fish. And at the end of the chapter. Well where is Jonah? Jonah is in the drink. Isn't he? At the bottom of the sea.

It's in David Jones' locker. He's been thrown overboard. Verse 15. It's ceased. From it's raging. Now I don't want to read into this passage.

Something that isn't there. But it seems to me. When you take the New Testament controls. Of how Jesus speaks. Of the book of Jonah. This is a wonderful picture of the gospel.

And it is a template of salvation. So if you look at verse 10. It says. Then the men were exceedingly afraid. And said. What is this you have done? For the men knew.

[20:09] That he was fleeing. From the presence of the Lord. Because he told them. Which again is. Wonderfully ironic. And the sea is. Getting rougher and rougher.

So they say. What should we do to you? What should we do to you? To make the sea calm down for us? And he's owned up. That he's on the run from God. God. And they know that this is the God. Who has sent the storm. And they are asking now. What do we need to do. To save ourselves.

From this storm. And Jonah says. Pick me up. And throw me into the sea. And it will become calm. I know that it's my fault.

That the great storm. Has come upon us. Because of me. And so do you see. Jonah knows what is happening. And Jonah knows. That God is angry. And that is why there is a storm.

God is angry. That is why there is a storm. God is angry. And Jonah knows who's to blame. He is to blame. And so he says. Pick me up. And throw me into the sea. Now that just may be a death wish.

[21:06] Lots of commentators think it is. He might just be saying. I'd rather be dead. Than go to the pagans in Nineveh. He might be as stubborn as that. He might be saying. I'd rather die.

Than see those people saved from hell. Maybe he is saying that. Or maybe. Now God has awakened him. And brought him back to his senses. And maybe he is saying.

Well it is my fault. Throw me overboard. I am willing to die. So that you might live. And be spared in the storm. And maybe you think. Well that's crazy. Of course not.

That's exactly what the sailors thought. Notice what they say in verse 13. Instead of throwing him overboard. What did they do? They did their best to row back to shore. So there they are.

Rowing and rowing and rowing. Against the waves and against the wind. And they are desperately trying to get the boat back to the shore. But the sea grew even wilder. We are told. And they cried out to the Lord.

[22:01] Please don't let us die. Please don't let us die. For taking this man. Oh Lord do not let us perish. Verse 14.

For this man's life. Don't hold us accountable. And lay not on us innocent blood. For you oh Lord have done as it pleased you.

So they picked up Jonah. And hurled him into the sea. And the sea ceased from its region. And God's anger stopped. And then we are told in verse 16. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly. They offered a sacrifice to the Lord.

And they made vows. So a boatload of pagans are saved. And they offer sacrifices to the Lord. To Yahweh. And they make their vows to him. Now do you see what is happening?

They are trying to save themselves aren't they? Can you pick that up in the narrative? They are rowing. And rowing. And rowing. And they can't.

[23:03] And in the end. What do they need to do? They need to stop rowing. And start trusting the word of the prophet. And they need to give up their attempts to save themselves.

And to trust in the one. Who was to be thrown overboard. And that is where their salvation lay. They need to trust in the one who was three days and three nights in the belly of a fish.

And that's what they had to do. It was a ridiculous thing to do. It's so counterintuitive. If you are in the middle of a storm. You want to row to shore as quickly as possible. But instead they have to trust the one who is to be thrown overboard.

Who spends three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish. And that's what we will see next week. That's what he is famous for. But then we read. Verse 17.

The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of a fish three days and three nights. But we will see what happens to him there next week. In the belly of a fish. But do you know what Jesus said?

[ 24 : 05 ] Jesus said just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a fish. Jesus said that he would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Jonah as far as I'm aware is the only minor prophet that Jesus quotes. And he's not really quoting Jonah. Jonah. He is really identifying himself with Jonah.

In fact Jesus is the ultimate Jonah. That's what we read earlier. I doubt if Jonah would make it into the top ten list of prophets. He's hardly is he what you'd call a model prophet.

But Jonah is the prophet that Jesus compares himself to. When he says one greater than Jonah is here. Now what does that mean? What does it mean that when he says. When he tells the story of the fish and the three days and the three nights.

And he says I tell you the truth. One greater than Jonah is here. Well surely that's meaningless isn't it? Everyone is greater than Jonah. When you see the way that Jonah is here.

[ 25 : 05 ] Jonah is a rubbish prophet. The sailors call him don't they? In verse 15. An innocent man that should be. He's anything but innocent.

They think they've thrown an innocent man overboard. But in reality he is a fallen disobedient. Self-righteous. Ungrateful. Angry. Complaining. Racist. That's the man they've thrown overboard. So what does Jesus mean when he says that greater than Jonah is here? In what sense is Jesus greater than Jonah? Well again I think the clue is in verse 15.

In this sense. Because Jesus is truly the innocent man. He is. He has innocent blood.

Isn't he? He is the one who is without sin. He's the one who came into this world. The sinless son of God. To take the blame for our sin. For our wrongdoing.

[ 26 : 08 ] And he came into this world. And he was hurled. He was hurled into the sea of God's anger. Isn't that what the cross is about? Isn't that the meaning of the cross? Jesus didn't die as an example of supreme self-sacrifice.

He was made sin for us. He who knew no sin. This is love. Not that we loved God. But that God loved us. And God gave his son to be a propitiation for our sins.

You know what propitiation is. It is a way of talking of God's anger. So that the anger of God fell on Jesus and not on us. Or it should be. A greater than Jonah is here.

And here is an innocent one. Who throws himself into the sea of God's anger. And takes the blame for our sin. Willingly in our peace. And on the third day.

God raises him from the dead. And on the cross. Jesus Christ did go down. Down. Down. Down into death. Down into the grave. And on the third day.

[ 27 : 04 ] Jesus raised him from the dead. So let me say this to you tonight. It is Jesus you need to see. And you need to stop trying to save yourself.

Drop the oars. Stop rowing. Trust the one who was thrown overboard for you. Trust the one who was in the grave for three days and three nights. Take Jesus as your saviour.

And as your substitute. And that brings me to the last thing. God sent a great storm. He prepared a great fish. And he used a great storm and a great fish. To bring Jonah to the great city.

The city of Nineveh. Look at verse 1. Now the Lord. Word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai. Saying arise and go to Nineveh. That great city. And call out against it.

For their evil has come up before me. It's a sprawling city. It's the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

They were the most powerful people on earth in those days. They were Israel's enemies. And just as it is today.

[ 28 : 05 ] Three thousand years. Nothing much has changed. Different people. But the same kind of unspeakable cruelty and barbarity. And that is where God wants Jonah to go. The word of the Lord came to Jonah.

Arise. Go to Nineveh. That great city. And call out against it. Kurt Mitchell has a cartoon in a children's storybook. That depicts Jonah as a mouse.

And the people of Nineveh as cats. And this mouse is asked to go and preach to the cats. And that's what God is asking him to do. One other writer said.

It is like asking a Jewish rabbi in 1943. To go to Berlin. And cry out against the wickedness of the people there. And that is what God is asking Jonah to do.

And the only way that that mission can be accomplished. Did you notice? In the passage. It's an impossible task. And so Jesus commands his church.

[ 29 : 03 ] Doesn't he? To go into all the worlds. To all the nations. And preach the gospel. To go into every kind of culture. And every kind of language group. And bring the message of salvation. And they won't want to hear it.

And they will be radically opposed to it. But Jesus says. Go to his church. And remember what he says. At the end of that great commission. He says. No I am with you always.

At the end of the age. I think it's very interesting. The order there isn't it? He doesn't say. I am here now with you. Now you go. No he doesn't say that. That's often what we want.

We want don't we God to revive us. And then when he revives us. Well we will plant churches all over the place. That's not how it works. Jesus says. Go. And as you go.

What do you discover? You discover you're not on your own. And you discover that God has been there ahead of you. For a start. And not only that he's with you. Right there and there. But actually.

[ 30 : 00 ] The promise of the presence of the spirit. Is tied to the church's mission. And Jonah was running away from God's presence. When John Wesley.

The great Methodist preacher. Lay dying. During the last moments of his life. He kept saying these words. Over and over again. And best of all. Is that God is with us. The best of all.

Is that God is with us. God is with us. God is with us. And you can face any challenge. If you know not. If you know.

If you run from the presence of the Lord. You're in trouble. David Livingstone. The pioneer missionary. He was once asked. What kept him going. It's a fascinating story. David Livingstone. He's attacked and made by a lion. His body is often wracked by fever. And dysentery. The one home he had built. Was burnt down during the Boer War.

[ 30 : 58 ] His wife died on the mission field. Most of the time. He was all alone at the work. And when he was asked. What kept him there. He said. It was those words. Lo I am with you always. Even at the end of the age.

Once when someone asked him. About the sacrifices he had made. He exploded with anger. Sacrifice. Sacrifice. He said. The only sacrifice. Is to be outside the will of God. And when you do that.

You forfeit the presence of God. And that is what was happening with Jonah. In this chapter. He was running away from the presence of God.

He was running away from the presence of God. Is that you tonight? You can be in church. You can be in church. And run away from the presence of God. But as the hidden puts it.

He knows the way to bring us back. My fallen spirit. To restore. Come with me to chapter 3. Verse 2 of chapter 3.

[ 32 : 00 ] Verse 1 of chapter 3. And the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time. The second time. God is the God of the second chance.

And God is. The God of the new beginning. And God is the God of the fresh opportunity. And the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.

Arise. Saying arise. Go to Nineveh. That great city. And call out against it. The message that I tell you. God is the God of the new beginning. The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.

And may it come to you tonight. Let's pray. Thank you.