

Jonah 1:3-16

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[0:00] I confess, I'm not very handy at DIY things. In fact, I go so far as to say I am agnostic! towards DIY things. As I go around my house, I just kind of close my eyes, I tend not to think about things. And normally I've got away with it. However, when I ignored the guttering that wasn't working and the downpipe that was dripping, when I ignored the bush that was growing very bushy, very near our front window, I kind of got what I was asking for really. It turns out that one of the windows, our front window, was really rotten. Not just a bit rotten, but completely rotten. And so a great expense, what I consider a great expense, we had to pay a carpenter, actually two carpenters, the first one did a great job, to come and tear out all the rotten stuff and fix it all up. Thankfully I've got a neighbour two doors down, who's a surveyor. And so he's made it his mission in life to make me care about my house, to make me care about the practical things I otherwise just wouldn't pay any interest to. And I've learnt from Paul that I need to pay attention to these things, because they do actually matter. They do have consequences whether I'm interested or not. They will come home to roost. Well, a lot of people are a bit like that with God, aren't they? We think we can ignore him. Perhaps we cry out to him in trouble, but for the most part we think we can just ignore him. My neighbour Paul, who has convinced me I need to be concerned about drain pipes and gutterings, I'm trying to convince him that actually he needs to be concerned about whether there was a God there or not. It's not just his wife's job, which is what his typical response is. Now as we look at this part of Jonah chapter 2, or Jonah chapter 1 rather, we're going to see a God who cannot be evaded, a God who cannot be ignored, a God who cannot just be dismissed, but a God who is real and who is there. What's a great lesson in this chapter is that we cannot ignore the unavoidable God. We cannot ignore him. However uncomfortable we may feel, however disinterested we might feel, here is a God we have to do business with. And we'll see why as we go through this story. We're going to look at it in four scenes. Scene 1 is the storm, verses 3 to 6. Scene 2 is the investigation, in verses 7 to 12. Scene 3 is the solution, in verses 3 to 15, and then we get the aftermath, in verse 16. So we're going to look at it in those terms. But the context here, of course, is we've got a man who is trying to ignore God. He's trying to run away from God. Jonah, he was a prophet, we're told in verse 1. He's a man who had experienced God using him.

He'd heard God speak to him. He had the privilege of knowing the living God. Yet at this point in his life, he says, I'm not interested. I'm out of here. He's commanded to go east to Assyria, to the city of Nineveh, over the river from modern day Mosul in Iraq. And so what does he do?

He gets on a boat and heads west to Tarshish in southern Spain. He's fleeing God. He thinks he can ignore God and just not do what God has told him to do. But this God is unavoidable.

Look at verse 4. Look at this storm. 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. So the Lord wanted to get Jonah's attention. Jonah couldn't just avoid God. He couldn't just ignore God. He couldn't just run away from God. The Lord brought circumstances in his life that were designed to make him sit up.

And so he made other people sit up. Look at verse 5. 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. You see what God does? He hurls a storm onto the sea.

The sailors can hurl cargo over the side. But this great unavoidable God is so powerful he can hurl storms around. He cannot just be ignored. He cannot be avoided. Whatever people like to do. You know, I think of some friends of mine who call themselves agnostics.

[4:14] Like I was a bit agnostic about DIY. I literally agnostic, don't know much about it. So these people claim to be agnostic. They don't know about God. And there are some agnostics who kind of hide behind that. Well, I'm sure it'll all be alright. I'm sure it'll work out.

Well, you cannot hide from this God here, who is even in control of the wind and the waves. You cannot be ignored. What we see here is a God who pursues even people who run away from him. He pursues Jonah. And as he pursues Jonah, the mariners, the sailors get caught up in that. And they're afraid. These hardened sailors out at sea, they're terrified by this storm. At their own great cost, they're throwing all the cargo overboard. There was no Lloyd's underwriters there to pay for that. It was at their own expense to try and save their lives, to try and preserve the lives of passengers like Jonah. They would throw things overboard.

You see, these guys are kind of, let's call them honourable agnostics. Look at verse 5. Each cried out to his God. Each cried out to his God. So the storm comes. They know they're in trouble. And they cling to any kind of hope they have. They all call out to their own God. Quite probably they were from different nations, from different countries, or different regions at least. So they would have had their own little gods that were worshipped in their areas. So that's who they're crying out to. So they're encouraging each other.

So keep praying, one of these gods might do something. I don't know how you think about God or gods. Many people today think that there is no absolute truth, that perhaps every religion gets to God. I have one friend who's told me recently he's a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ and his spirit guide Buddha. I have to say, no you're not. That is not the way it works. Jesus doesn't give us that alternative. I think of another friend of mine, a colleague I used to work with, an old job several years ago. Delightful young lady, very smart. She's a natural sciences graduate from Cambridge University. And yet she's one of those superstitious people who I know. She'll touch wood whenever she says something. She'll even throw salt over her shoulder. She has little model Buddhas around the place. She'll go to a Christmas Eve service every Christmas. She'd often ask me to pray for her. Which my normal response should have been actually, Jenny pray yourself. You can pray yourself. Trust in Jesus, you can pray yourself. But you see she was like these sailors. She didn't really want to think about the truth. But she'd cling on to anything that was out there that might give her hope. Like these guys praying to any God. Well, do you see where Jonah is? Are these sailors fearing for their lives, throwing the cargo overboard, crying out to any God that might hear them?

[7:01] What's Jonah doing? End of verse 5. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. Even with a storm, he's just sleeping. See, he ignored God's word. He'd rebelled against God's word. So now he's not even sensitive to this storm that God has sent to try and wake him up. Life's like that, isn't it? If we harden ourselves to God's word, if we try and ignore God's clear word, what he's written and what he gives us in the Bible, if we harden ourselves to that, then we'll become hardened to all he's doing.

He may have to take drastic action to stop us avoiding him. Well, Jonah, the prophet, has fallen asleep. So what's going to get him to pray? Well, it's the pagan captain, isn't it? Look at verse 6. 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. So here's Jonah, man who's had experience of the living God speaking through him.

And yet he's so hardened himself to God, he's not even praying anymore. It takes someone who's not a believer in the true God to wake him up and say, let's get praying. Let's get praying. Maybe God will hear. So here's the storm. The storm was sent by God to bring his runaway servant back to his senses.

When we get the investigation, the storm raging and Jonah now up on deck, the investigation begins. This is scene 2. Look at verse 7.

[8:40] 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 the sailors have sailed enough that they know this is a very special storm.

And they believed in gods that could do things. And so they assumed that there must be a cause for this, there must be a reason for it. Now of course that's very different to our secular mindset of our world today, which teaches us that there are only material causes, only scientific causes, that we don't need gods to explain anything. And yet, how often do you hear someone say something along the lines of, I'm sure this must have happened for a reason, or maybe it's fate that this has happened, or maybe it's my lucky start. How often do we see people reading horoscopes? Because they're desperate, thinking that knowing there must be some meaning in the universe, there must be some reason for things happening to them, but looking in all the wrong places for them. Yet as soon as we think that there must be fate or reason or a purpose, that is an indication to us that actually we are hardwired as human beings to know there is a god in control of everything. If this universe only existed by random chance, just time and chance brought it all into being, then there could be no reason, there could be no purpose, there could be no meaning to anything, not even our thoughts, they'd just be random electrochemical interactions in our skulls. They couldn't mean anything.

The very fact that we look for meaning and purpose in the world is because there is a great god who designed it all, who brings meaning and brings purpose. And as the sailors cast lots here, it's because they understand something of that, it's because they know there must be a reason behind what's happening to them. And they hope that somehow that will be revealed in the lots. Well the Bible presents us with a personal god, not just blind chance, not some impersonal god, not some pantheon of deities, but one god who is personal, who is in control, and who can give answers to questions. And so as the lots are cast, we find the lot goes to Jonah. Look at the end of verse 7. So they cast lots and the lot fell to Jonah. So the Bible tells us the personal real god, the creator god, is in charge of everything, even lots.

So Proverbs chapter 16 verse 33 says, the lot is cast into the lap, but it's every decision is from the Lord. The Lord knows what the lottery numbers are going to be this week. He's not going to tell you, because he wants you to trust him, not the lottery numbers. But he knows. There are no surprises. And so Jonah is identified as the cause of this storm.

And so the investigation hops up. Look at verse 8. Here comes the interrogation. Then they said to him, tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. Do you notice they're giving Jonah the benefit of the doubt? Well, maybe he's just going to tell us who the problem is. Maybe it's not actually him. Then the killer question Jonah doesn't answer. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?

[12:06] Notice he doesn't tell them he's a prophet. He keeps quiet about that. But what he does say does incriminate him. Listen to his words in verse 9. 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. Now what do you think? Do you think Jonah really feared the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land? Of course not. He just completely disobeyed God's word and got in the opposite direction.

There he is sleeping peacefully on a boat in a storm, sent by that very God he claims to fear. The God who created the sea and the land. The God who is in control of everything.

See, Jonah's problem here is he has the right words in his head. He can speak the right belief with his mouth. But it's not in his heart. It's not affecting his life. He's a hypocrite.

He talks the talk, but he doesn't walk the walk. I don't know about you, but the self and that's my problem, isn't it? The self and that's my problem. I believe in a God who's in control of everything. And yet I'm so slow to pray about things. I believe in a God who's treated me with forgiveness and mercy and love. And yet I get so angry with other people. It's easy to walk the walk, to talk the talk. Much harder to walk the walk, isn't it? But here's Jonah. Oh, I fear the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land. But look at the sailors, look at their response. They have much more integrity, don't they? Verse 10, then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, what is this you've done? You serve the God who's in charge of all this? No wonder we've got a storm. What is it you've done, Jonah?

For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord because he had told them. See how scared they are now? They're realising they're harbouring a fugitive. It's like having an escaped convict in your car, unknowingly, seeing the police cars behind you, thinking, oh no, I'm in trouble now. Well, that's what these sailors are thinking. We've got this fugitive on board from this great and powerful God. We're in trouble. Notice how their fear changes as well. Back in verse 5, they were exceedingly afraid. They were afraid, rather, of the storm. They were afraid of being destroyed. Now they're afraid of this God who is angry with Jonah. So now they asked the right person the right question. Verse 11, then they said to Jonah, what shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us? For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. And it's now for the first time, Jonah seems to be coming to his senses. And Jonah wants to help these sailors. So he says this, he said to them, pick me up and hurl me into the sea. You hurled the cargo in before, now hurl me into the sea.

[15:09] And the God who hurled this storm onto the sea will take it away. Then the sea will quiet down for you. For I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you. Jonah realises it's his rebellion that's brought this storm. It's his guilt. And there's no way forward for Jonah until he admits he's running from God and he's wrong. There's no way forward for any of us with God until we admit that we're running away from him. Now it's not actually any sign that Jonah's sorry here. He just admits he's at fault. It seems he's ready to die.

Just hurl me into the sea. You'll live. I'll be dead. But maybe that's what I deserve. Well that's the interrogation or the investigation. We've had the storm, the investigation. Let's look at the solution then. Scene 3, verse 13. 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.

You see, these men want to save Jonah's life. They don't want to just hurl this man into the sea. He's not just a lump of cargo. They value him as a fellow human being. They don't want him to die. They're really more honourable than Jonah is. Despite the trouble he's brought on them, they still want to save him. It's often the way, isn't it? How often do we hear people say, why is it that people who don't believe in God are actually morally better? Why is it the nicer people in my office are colleagues who have no religious belief at all? Whereas sometimes Christians can be really horrible to each other. Well, that's the case of Jonah, isn't it?

It's Jonah the prophet who should know better. He acts pretty disgracefully throughout this story. Whereas it's these honourable agnostics, these sailors who don't know the true God, who actually are working much better, looking after him much better. But the Lord who controls everything is in pursuit. He's honing in on his man. Honing in on his man. He will not let Jonah go. Whatever the people do. Look at the rest of verse 13. Men rode hard to get back to dry land, but they could not. They were trying to save Jonah themselves, but they could not. Because what Jonah needed was not mercy from men, but mercy from God. And so then the sailors realise if they're throwing Jonah overboard, they need mercy too. Look at verse 14. 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. Can you imagine the tension they were feeling? They were told they had to throw this man overboard, and yet they know it's wrong to kill someone. And yet there's no escape from the storm unless they do it. And so they cry out in desperation for the Lord to have compassion on them. Don't hold us guilty for this blood, for you are doing as you please, Lord. What's their only hope? Not in their skill as sailors. They can't get to dry land. Not in their religious prayers, as they cried out to other gods that couldn't save them. That didn't work. Their hope is not in their own moral rightness, even though they've been pretty upright people all the way through this. Their only hope is that the Lord will have compassion on them.

The only hope is that the Lord will have compassion. So verse 15, they've picked up Jonah, hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. The storm spilled straight away. Why? Because the storm came because of God's rightful anger against Jonah's rebellion.

[18:55] So it's only as the price seems to be paid for Jonah's rebellion, as Jonah is thrown into the sea, that the storm can still. This God who reigns over everything is rightly angry when people turn away from him, wreck each other and wreck his world as a result. That anger has been satisfied somehow. Well, the sailors knew that they just needed mercy

because they could not satisfy that anger. So verse 16, then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. That's the language of worship. So Psalm 116 verses 17 and 18 ends like this, I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of his people. These sailors who'd started by being kind of agnostic, praying to any God they thought might work, now recognize there is only one true God. They acknowledge that, they acknowledge they just needed his mercy, and now they worship him and fear him. Their only hope was this God will have compassion. And so they admit their guilt and trust him, and the Lord heard them. And as we'll see next time, this was not the end of the road for Jonah, either. The Lord had compassion and mercy on him, too. And so in the very next verse over the page, we'll read about the Lord sending a whale to rescue him. But we'll look at that next time.

The question for now is, what did both the rebellious prophet and these kind of honest agnostics, these upright religious sailors, what did they both need? Answer? They both needed to acknowledge that the Lord is unavoidable, and to trust him that he'll be compassionate and merciful. That's what they needed.

I've learned in the last year, I can't just ignore my gutters. Something bad will happen. Even more real, even more true, is this God who is unavoidable. He is there. We cannot avoid him.

We can trust him to be compassionate. And he is a God who pursues us as he pursued Jonah. He pursues us, in some senses, through our circumstances as he did through Jonah. I remember about two years ago, sitting down with a man who had a successful career, had happily married two kids, but he was starting to ask questions for the first time in his life, because I met him for the first time the night before he went into hospital for a kidney transplant.

[21:36] And suddenly, with his health on the line, suddenly, in his own words, feeling his own mortality, he was open to asking questions about, okay, so is there a God there? Who is this God?

So the Lord can bring circumstances into our lives, breakdowns of relationships, problems at work, health, all sorts of things, in his pursuit of us. But most importantly, it's not just the circumstances he sends, but he sent his son to pursue us, the Lord Jesus himself.

Jesus said, I come to seek and to save the lost. And he did that, he pursued us, coming to earth to win us back, coming to earth to die, to bring, to still the storm of God's just anger against us.

In this story here, Jonah was the guilty one, he was thrown in. Jesus Christ was the perfect innocent one, he didn't deserve to die, but he did die as our substitute, as he came to pursue us.

So our hope is to acknowledge that God has sent his rescuer, to see his compassion in the Lord Jesus, who died in a place of rebellious people like me and you, and to trust him.

[22:45] The sovereign Lord is unavoidable. We must cast ourselves on his compassion, the compassion we see most fully in Jesus. Let's pray.