

The Lord Rules

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[0:00] Good evening, my name's Archie, if we haven't met. I'm the pastor in training here and it's my privilege, my pleasure to be opening what I think is one of the most exciting chapters in the whole Bible for you this evening.

I really do love this chapter. I think it's very cleverly written and I hope that we're going to get a lot out of it together this evening. As we do that, let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word, that it is living and active, that it speaks today.

We pray as we open it together this evening that your Holy Spirit would be at work in each of us, that you would be transforming lives tonight. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

As we begin, I want you to imagine with me a king. I think sometime in the Middle Ages, when the British monarchy perhaps was at its sort of absolute pomp, when the king really did rule.

What he says goes. Now I want you to picture that king's messenger, the man who sends important messages to other important people. What would that messenger be wearing?

[1:16] Right. I'd bet that he's got some pretty fancy clothes on. People need to see in him the power of the king whose message he brings. And I'd bet he's got a sort of certain assurance about him, right?

It's just the way a representative of the king carries himself. Earlier this week, I bumped into a friend in the gym and there's no two ways about it.

This guy is balding. And as I walked into the changing room, he was there in the mirror trying to style the little hair that he is clinging on to. And so I greeted him.

I'm not proud of this. I greeted him by saying, I wouldn't bother, mate. You can't polish a turd. Now, he and I, we're good friends, this guy. He and I are good friends.

But as you can imagine, he wasn't especially happy with me. And I obviously felt awful. I apologize pretty quickly. We're all good now. But that wasn't before he gave me. And I wonder if you've ever had a line like this.

[2:15] That's not very nice. You're supposed to be a Christian. It's absolutely gutting when someone comes out with something like that, isn't it? Because how we live as Christians, how we represent Jesus to a watching world is just so important.

And people notice. We represent a king. And who we are and how we live tells people what we think about that king.

Can he really save? Transform lives? Do we really believe that he is powerful? Does he really rule?

In Jonah, we saw last week that the sort of big overarching theme of this book is that the Lord saves. Well, this evening, the emphasis in this chapter is that the Lord saves.

He really does have the power to transform lives because the Lord rules. We'll see that through these two movements in the narrative.

[3:24] It'd be helpful to have Jonah open in front of you as we go through it. These two movements, firstly, as Jonah flees in verses 1 to 3. And then as the sailors come to fear in the rest of the chapter.

So let's dive into it together. We see straight away in verse 1. And we thought about this last week. So think of this as a bit of a recap. But this is a prophetic book, right?

Verse 1. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai. It's a prophetic book. That's how prophetic books start. As the word of the Lord is spoken through his prophets.

But if you were here last week, we know that this is a very unusual book as far as the prophets go. Most of them, the bulk of the text is God speaking through the man. But here it's mostly narrative.

There's a poem prayer in chapter 2. But it is mostly narrative. And then you get the shortest word from God. The shortest evangelistic talk of all time, if you like. It's just five Hebrew words in chapter

3.

[4 : 26] This is a very unusual book for one of the prophets. And Jonah is a very unusual prophet, a very unusual man. We saw again last week that Jonah was a prophet in the court of Jeroboam II.

And Israel was incredibly prosperous under the reign of this king. And through Jonah's work as a prophet, Jonah had an incredibly comfortable job. He was proclaiming prosperity to Israel.

And so see then in verse 2, see the job that Jonah is given by God. Go to the city, the great city of Nineveh, and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.

It's not an attractive job, that, is it? I mean, you might think of it a bit like this. I don't know if you saw it last week, the woman on the Russian news channel. She was an editor, I think, of Channel 1 in Russia.

And she comes on to the live broadcast in the background with a big sign protesting against the war in Ukraine. And in some ways, the job that Jonah's been given is a bit like that.

[5 : 35] Go and call out against the wickedness of this great city. And of course, just like the woman on the news, Jonah must have felt a certain inevitability about the outcome of that job.

These evil people, God's enemies, surely the only way they could possibly respond is by having him arrested, probably even having him killed. From the perspective of his comfortable court profit job, not so attractive.

And maybe Jonah was worried, too, about the implications of God's message going to a foreign nation. Not just because he was racist, but because of the implications for Israel.

Remember Israel under this king, Jeroboam II. Israel had continued to persist themselves in this calf-worshipping, idolatry sin. And in 2 Kings chapter 14, as we read last week, God describes that as evil.

And so as Jonah is given the job of going to Nineveh and calling out the evil there, Jonah's got to be thinking, what does that mean for the evil here in Israel?

[6 : 40] What does that mean for Jonah, considering the evil idolatry that he seems to be engaged in himself? And I think we might just pause here and see a warning in this for ourselves.

As we seek to share the gospel of Jesus with our friends and our families, helping them to see their sin and recognize their need for this mercy.

Isn't it just so vital that we see and recognize our own sin as we do that? And friends, can I just say that this actually should be the normal Christian experience.

It's one of tension. Why? For we know that we ought to be progressing and growing and becoming less sinful. And yet the more we progress and grow, the more aware of our sin we become, the more sinful we feel.

And so if you're here this evening and you feel the guilt and shame of your sin, well, that is a very good sign that the Holy Spirit is at work in you. And as you look to Jesus, as you trust in him, that you are forgiven.

[7 : 52] For even as we hold out this good news of the gospel to the world around us, we live daily reliant on the mercy of Jesus ourselves. Just as we saw that the Israelites in two kings were reliant on the mercy of God.

That's the context that Jonah is in. And so let's see how he responds to this job that he's given. In verse three, what does he do? He flees. Have a look at verse three.

Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed to Tarshish. It's repeated, I think, at the end of the verse. Sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. A little bit of geography for you.

Hopefully you can see that map. Nineveh is up there in the northeast. And we're not exactly sure where Tarshish is, but elsewhere in the Bible it's used poetically.

A sort of city over there, way across the sea, in the west. And that's exactly where Jonah heads. He heads down to Joppa to board a ship and out onto the sea.

[8 : 54] I don't know if you noticed as we read this chapter, but the sea is a really big deal here. Nine times the sea is mentioned explicitly in this chapter. And it's not so obvious to us today.

I don't know about you, but when I think of the sea, I tend to think of childhood holidays, beach trips, sand in my sandwiches, that sort of thing. But for the ancient Israelite, the sea was just full of symbolic freight.

And that might seem strange, but if you think about it, we do exactly the same thing today. We load things with symbolic freight in our culture, don't we? For us, a red rose is just an obvious symbol of love, a four-leaf clover, a symbol of luck.

For the ancient Israelite, the sea was a symbol of anti-God chaos. Back in Genesis chapter 1, right at the beginning of the Bible, the Spirit hovers over the formless, empty, dark, chaotic waters. And in creation, the Spirit brings order to that chaos. And ever since, despite the sea being part of God's good creation, it becomes this image in Hebrew poetry of chaos and darkness and death. [10:07] Very often, actually, maybe if you think back to our series in Job, if you remember it, but also in the Psalms, the sea, as an anti-God image, it is paired with a great watery swimming monster.

Keep that in your back pocket for later. But for now, this is the direction that Jonah heads in. It's a movement towards death and destruction. But of course, Jonah is a prophet. He's not a theological idiot. He knows that you can't just run away from God. This isn't obvious in translation, but literally, the end of verse 3, it reads, Jonah flees from before the Lord. Before the Lord is a phrase used to describe prophets in the Bible. It's a sort of job description. And so here, it's his prophet job that Jonah is running from. He's called to go to Nineveh with a life-bringing message. And he heads in precisely the opposite direction. Notice in the context that that is precisely what Israel, who were the original readers of this book, have done.

[11:22] They are called by God to be a light to the nations, to represent him to the watching world. And in their calf-worshipping idolatry, all they've done is exactly what the nations around them are doing.

They're just not representing God at all. And again, I think there's a challenge in this for us. The Bible says, doesn't it, that we are right at the start created in the image of God, that we're made to be something like him.

But we don't live like that. All of us fail, don't we, to reflect that image perfectly. If you're here this evening and you're not a Christian, understand this, that that brokenness is true of all of us. And the message of Christianity is not that we would try and restore that image ourselves, but that in Jesus, the one man who, being God, reveals that image perfectly as a human being. And in what he has done for us in dying on the cross in our place, that we are freely given a new identity. Not that we are now perfect, but that he is perfect for us.

[12:33] And so as Christians, having wonderfully been given this identity in Christ, we're called then to be disciples of him, making disciples of him.

Called to be light in a very dark world. And so the challenge for us this evening, are we striving to live like that? Are we really carrying God's life-giving message to a needy and desperate world? Or are we functionally fleeing from before the Lord? We've got to be prepared to put ourselves into places where there are people who don't know Jesus.

And when we're there, we can't just check out. It's so tempting, isn't it, to lead a sort of double life when you head to work or you're hanging out with your friends who don't know Jesus and you just keep him in your church box.

Do they even know you're a Christian? It's much more comfortable to slide into the shadows, to stay out of trouble.

[13:43] But friends, to do so is to flee from before the Lord. It is to avoid doing the job that he's given every Christian to do. It's a movement away from his life-giving message towards the chaos and death of the sea.

That's the movement Jonah makes as he flees. But see in the rest of the chapter, even as the Lord who rules remains the main character, the emphasis shifts now to the sailor's fear.

The other day, forgive me if this seems really random, but the other day I was Googling what happens when you mix milk and blue Fanta. What happens when you mix milk and blue Fanta? If you'd like to know why I was Googling that, come and ask me later. But what happened? I only got as far as typing what happens when a bunch of suggested searches came up, as it does on Google.

And I think they were really revealing of what we're really afraid of. Maybe you can guess what they were. What happens when you die?

[14:48] What happens in the afterlife? See, for most, and I guess particularly without the gospel, what greater uncertainty is there than the question of what lies beyond the grave?

Certainly for the sailors in Jonah, three times we're told of their fear. And each time they come closer to grasping who this God is, but it begins in verse five with their fear, essentially of death.

We see why they're so afraid of that in verse four. Have a look at verse four. Firstly, just notice who is in control here.

It is the Lord who rules. He's the one who sends this wind. He has the power to control even the anti-God image of the sea.

And see the power of this storm. It's so violent that this ship might actually be torn apart. Picture that with me.

[16:00] This is almost 3,000 years ago. Imagine being on that boat. Picture the sort of rough wooden boat. Imagine being on a boat like that in a storm like this.

Imagine being on a boat like this.

And yet Jonah, in the rest of verse five, Jonah had gone below deck where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. Notice that the movement.

Jonah goes down to Joppa, to the sea, and now down again below deck, closer and closer to the watery grave he goes. And he doesn't seem to care about the storm as he sleeps, does he?

He'd rather die than do the job that the Lord has given him. See in verse six, as they wake Jonah, what they ask him to do.

[17:16] Call on your God, they say. At this stage, I think it's not that they think that Jonah's God might be especially powerful. But they're still just terrified of dying.

And they'll try anything. I mean, they cast lots, don't they, in verse seven, to see whose fault this is. That's essentially just rolling the dice, right? Just a really normal way to work out divine will in ancient cultures.

Again, just recognize who is in control here, who rules, as the lot rightly falls to Jonah. And then the sailors, they sort of lose it, don't they, with all those questions in verse eight.

But they're essentially all asking the same thing. Who are you that this storm might have been caused by what you've done? And Jonah's answer comes in verse nine.

Have a look at verse nine. I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. You see what Jonah is saying?

[18:18] This is just a very orthodox profession of faith. It's the answer that any good Israelite prophet would give. And yet we have to ask, don't we? Is that really true?

Or at least is it really lived out? Rico Tice, you might have heard of Rico Tice. He's an evangelist down in London. He tells this story, and forgive me, I can't remember where I read this story, and so I'm not going to get all the details right.

But it goes something like this. He was at university. He was a Christian at the time and a rugby player. And he'd given one of his teammates a sermon to listen to. And so this guy from his rugby club, he hears all about Jesus.

He's blown away by the gospel. And so he then starts to share this sermon with some of the other guys from his rugby club. But one of them, he gets really angry at Rico.

Why didn't you tell me? I mean, you believe this is true? You really believe that this is true? And it took one of our other friends to share this with me. Am I really your friend?

[19:19] Do you really care about me at all? It's heartbreaking. And as Rico tells it, this was a pretty foundational moment for him.

See, if he really believed the gospel to be true, surely he'd desire to tell it to anyone who would listen. As we read Jonah, as we see that very orthodox profession of faith that he makes, aren't we asking of Jonah, if that's true, why would you run?

Why wouldn't you want to take this life-giving message to Nineveh out into the world? Friends, if we profess Jesus to be Lord, and if we really believe that to be a life-giving truth, wouldn't we desire to share it?

Or do we flee from before the Lord like Jonah does? And see what happens in verse 10 as the sailors hear about Jonah's God.

Do you see their response? Again, they're afraid. But they're no longer simply afraid of perishing in the sea. That's definitely still there. But see in verse 12, they're now asking how to make the sea calm.

[20:30] They don't want to die. But there is now an acknowledgement that this storm has been caused by this God, the Lord, who rules. And of course, the solution comes from Jonah in verse 12.

Pick me up and throw me into the sea. I don't think that's a sort of heroic attempt at sacrifice, so much as Jonah's continued willful downward trajectory towards the sea, towards chaos and death.

He's still saying, isn't he, I would rather die than carry out the life-giving ministry that I've been given. And though the sailors do their best to save Jonah in verse 13, they eventually succumb, crying out in prayer.

But now it's to the Lord. In verse 14, see, it's now the Israelites' God, the God who made the sea and the land. They name him. You know the Lord, when you read it capitalized like that, it's Yahweh, the name of promise, the name that says, I rescued Israel out of Egypt.

And in my ruling power, I have the power to save. And so the sailors, they recognize that this is the Lord who rules. See, at the end of verse 14, you, Lord, have done as you pleased.

[21 : 51] It is God who is in control here. It is his will that is carried out through the sailors. And as they throw Jonah overboard in verse 15, the raging sea is calmed.

For God is God over all creation. He has power, even over the anti-God chaos of the sea. This Lord rules.

And see how the sailors respond in verse 16. This is the final statement of their fear. As they fear the Lord. As Jonah professes faith, but does not live it out.

So the sailors truly or greatly, as verse 16 puts it, fear the Lord, make vows and sacrifice to him. We're going to think about this a little bit more as we come to communion.

But I wonder if this is how we respond to this God. Very often, the Bible calls for us to fear the Lord like this. We've just read this book as a staff team.

[22 : 54] What does it mean to fear the Lord? It's a very small book. You should read it. It's small. It's very digestible. It's a great book. Super helpful. Let me know if you'd like a copy. But one of the most helpful thoughts in that book, I think, is that generally we think of fear as a negative thing, don't we?

And I think that's probably because our usual experience of it is a reaction against something. But it is true that there is also a sense of fear, a healthy fear, that draws us towards something or someone.

Not because it is negative, but because it is awesome and beautiful. Like this, as we respond to the Lord who is absolutely in control, a Lord who saves because he rules.

And so just as we finish, the elephant, or I guess the fish in the room, verse 17. Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

We mentioned earlier that very often that the anti-God sea imagery, the image of chaos and death, that it is very often hand in hand with the idea of a great fishy monster.

[24 : 12] And notice here that the fish is huge. That word is actually the exact same Hebrew word that's translated great. The great city of Nineveh in verse 2.

And the great wind that the Lord sent on the sea in verse 4. The emphasis of this chapter, the Lord rules. He rules in the great city of Nineveh.

We'll see that in chapter 3. And here he rules the great fish. The fish, notice, that he provides to swallow the disobedient prophet. And he rules over creation, including the sea, that he can whip up a great wind and bring calm to it as he pleases.

Very significantly, as we think about the theme of this whole book, God saves. Notice, even as the disobedient prophet who has been given the job of taking the life-giving message to a pagan people, even as he tries to flee from that job, what happens?

Think back to that medieval king and his messenger.

[25 : 36] I want you to picture the king. Picture his crown with its many jewels. The cloak with the big white fluffy collar. The gold rings on every finger.

Everything about that king, the way he looks and what he wears, it shouts, doesn't it? This king rules. Friends, our God, the Lord of the sea and the earth, he rules the great fish.

He rules the wind and the sea. He has the power to transform lives. He has the power to save.

Isn't that just so important for us this evening? Even when it's very difficult to see, and it can be incredibly difficult to see in this messy world that we live in. As we take up the job that we've been given, as we do what we can to share this life-giving message, this is the wonderful truth of this book.

Our Lord saves. And he saves because he rules. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this wonderful, this incredible chapter of your word.

[27 : 02] We pray that as we respond to your rule, would you help us not to flee from you, but would you help us to respond and see you rightly?

Would you give us a healthy fear that draws us ever closer? In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.