

Introduction to Jonah

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you, Abby. Well, folks, as we dive into those passages, before we do so, let us pray together. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the wonderful privilege it is to gather around your word again this evening.

And Lord, I pray that as we do so, you would soften our hearts, open our ears. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen. Amen. Have you ever had a movie recommended to you? You know those movie recommendations. People give you just enough details of the plot line and the events that happen that you are invested.

You are hooked. Your interest is piqued. And they point out different parts of the movie that they'll think you will enjoy. And so you eagerly go down to the cinema or if you're like me, you find it on Netflix and you settle in to watch it.

For me recently, it was The Revenant. Maybe for you, it was Inception or The Matrix. I'm not endorsing any of those movies. But for most of us, if not all of us, have been in that situation, haven't we?

[1 : 1 5] So you've got your popcorn, you've got your drink of choice, and you are committed to this movie. But as it goes on, you find out that it's actually completely different from what you're expecting.

You'd been sold a superficial run-through of a plot line that was actually really, really complex. And so you leave the cinema confused, thinking you've wasted your time and your money and you're trying to connect the dots in your head of what you've just seen.

You were sold a simple story, but it turned out to be very complex. That is the book of Jonah. See, as we start this series, maybe you're expecting to hear a lot about a big fish.

Maybe you're expecting us preachers to stand up here and say, Jonah is a bad man. Don't be like him. Or maybe you've got images of children's story Bibles that make this story seem very, very simple.

Well, the longer I've studied Jonah over the last few months, the more confusing I found it. See, on one level, this story is simple and a child can pick up the book of Jonah and read it and get something from it.

[2 : 3 1] But when you get into the details of the book, it really isn't that straightforward. And that's why tonight we're going to do an introductory sermon, thinking about Jonah and his background, giving a bit of an overview of the book, and then some of the specific challenges that it brings us today.

And as we go through this series, what I want us to do is forget everything we know about the book of Jonah. And instead, let the text of God's word inform our minds, challenge our hearts, and impact our lives.

See, this book will both convict and comfort us as it presents us with its main message, which the Lord saves. So the first thing I want us to consider tonight is Jonah's background.

Look at Jonah chapter one, verse one. It says, The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. We get a little bit of more information about Jonah as Abby read to us in 2 Kings chapter 14.

If you turn there in your Bibles, we'll spend a little bit of time there. See, this passage introduces us to the prophet Jonah and helps us see the context and background that he's coming from.

[3 : 54] Now, knowing someone's background helps us make sense of their present actions, doesn't it? I'll give you a silly example of this. Sabina and I have a friend who makes spaghetti bolognese in the most bizarre way I've ever seen.

So once the meat is cooked and everything, they blend it with a soup mixer into some kind of strange, chunky, smooth sauce.

And now it's perfectly fine if you have a gag reflex at that because I know we did when we first heard it. Now, when I heard that, I thought it was unbelievably strange. But when she explained that that's how her parents had done it, that's how they taught her how to cook spaghetti bolognese, it made sense.

Background is important. And the same is true for Jonah. We need to see his background to understand why he acts the way he does in this, in the book of Jonah.

So in 2 Kings 14, verse 23, we're introduced to the king of Israel. Read it with me. In the 15th year of Amaziah, son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam, son of Jehoiash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and he reigned 41 years.

[5 : 14] Jeroboam II was the most significant political king of the northern tribe of Israel. Now, you've got to remember the history of the Old Testament here.

After King Solomon died, the 12 tribes of Israel split, 10 remaining in the north, which then became known as the country of Israel, and two in the south, known as Judah.

The southern kingdom included Israel. They had the temple, and they were the more faithful of the two, but by no means perfect. They were captured and taken into captivity to Babylon first.

But the northern kingdom, where Jeroboam was king and where Jonah was prophet, that was a whole different story. As you read the book of Kings, you'll see time and time again that repeated phrase, as it does here in verse 24, the king did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

Now, Jeroboam II led Israel in a time of prosperity, but it was also a rocky time because of the idolatry that had taken root in their country and in the hearts of its people.

[6 : 29] See, the tribes of Israel were told to travel to the temple in Jerusalem where they were to worship God. But in a political move, Jeroboam II set up two golden calves and shrines, one in the north and one in the south of the kingdom of Israel.

Private places of worship and golden calves, two things that should send alarm bells ringing in our minds for the nation of Israel. And as yeast spreads through bread, impacting every part of it, so the yeast of idolatry has taken a hold of this nation.

It was a religious melting pot of ideas that stood against everything God had commanded his people to do. And that's the context Jonah was in, a land of prosperity and idolatry.

And yet God was still working and the expansion of this kingdom was his doing. Look at verse 25. The expansion of the kingdom, it was done in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-Hefer.

It was Jonah who communicated God's will to this evil king to lead the northern country of Israel in their prosperity. All of it is God's will.

[7 : 57] And then in verse 26, it says, the Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering. There was no one to help them and since the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam, son of Jehoiash.

God was the one who put Jeroboam on the throne. Prior to his rule, Israel was suffering. It was poor. It was neglected. So God delivered them by giving them this king.

And this teaches us that God can be at work and ultimately use things, people, and nations that are evil for his own good purposes and to fulfill his own good plan.

We may not understand that. We certainly probably all have questions about how that works as we think of examples in our minds. But that's the reality of what this passage teaches us.

God can use all things, even evil things, for his good. God is compassionate to the rebellious people of Israel.

[9 : 13] So whilst we may not understand it fully, it is a wonderful thing because it is that same compassion of God that results in sinners like you and like me having the opportunity to hear the gospel and to be made right with God.

So Jonah was a prophet to Jeroboam II. And in verse 25, he's mentioned a little bit like a prophet of the court, a prophet of God who would advise the king or the government on matters and be a voice of reason.

So Jonah lived a very comfortable life. He had a place of power and honor in the courtroom of an evil king. But he wasn't the only prophet active at this time.

Amos and Hosea were active at the same time. And if you read their books in the Old Testament, which I'd encourage you to do, you'll see that they spoke very, very bluntly against the idolatry going on in the northern kingdom of Israel.

But not Jonah. So we have no indication that he spoke against idolatry. And what we do know of him from the book of Jonah doesn't really fill us with confidence, does it?

[10 : 30] A prophet of God who might not be promoting idolatry, but he is idly standing by and he is present when it's happening. He doesn't seem to be calling it to stop.

Could it be that the comfort Jonah enjoyed in Israel under Jeroboam II has led to spiritual lukewarmness? Look at the places in the world where there is largely peace and prosperity.

They are generally the places that are also spiritually lukewarm. And those places in the world where the church is growing and thriving are often the places where peace and plenty are not the norm.

So the reality of our human hearts is that when we get comfortable in life, when things are going well for us, we assume that we have the Lord's favour.

Jeroboam and Israel show us that that isn't always true. They had peace and plenty and yet they were still seen as evil in God's sight. Now there are two challenges for us today as we think about Jonah's background.

[11 : 47] The first is that a nation can be prosperous. It can be a place of peace and plenty and still be evil in the Lord's eyes.

Think of our home. In times when our nation is prospering which it has been doing for a very long time, we might be tempted to be proud and think that we're blessed by God.

We must be doing something right or we must be something special. We do that on a national level but we do it in our individual lives too, don't we?

We speak a lot about idolatry in our own hearts, things that we worship, the bigger bank balance, the bigger house, the faster car, the newest phone. We always want more and we never seem to have enough.

We're so focused on the temporary things of this life that we forget about the important and eternal things that really matter. See, in comfort it's easy to neglect our spiritual welfare.

[12 : 56] Maybe you think you're fine because you're living in a lovely city, because you're going to church every Sunday, you're doing and saying all the right things in front of people, you have the outward appearance that everything is fine, but inside you're spiritually anemic.

Could we be doing our normal routine and still be called evil in the Lord's sight? Now we must understand that a Christian is secure in Christ because it is God who saves.

Not our morality, not our religiosity. Jesus and his sacrifice are the only way that a person can be saved and that salvation is secure in him.

But we must challenge ourselves and ask if we're just going through the motions or are we truly following Christ? So the book of Jonah should act as a warning not to become comfortable and reject faithful devotion to God.

But the second challenge that it brings to us is we need to ask ourselves if we are like Jonah. If we're blending in.

[14 : 10] If we're being so influenced, if we're being influenced more by our surroundings than we are by what God has revealed to us in his word. Whose agenda are we following?

have we become so comfortable in this world that we no longer stand out? We blend in so much that people don't even know we're Christians.

Do your community, your family, our friends, our work colleagues notice a difference in the way that we live, the way that we talk, the way that we think and the way we approach people?

Do they see a fundamental difference that we are living for something, for someone else? So our lives as Christians shouldn't be, should be counter-cultural, not cultural conformists.

That's Jonah's background. He was a prophet in a rebellious nation under a rebellious king who lived a life of peace, plenty, and promise.

[15 : 19] dominants. The second thing I want us to think about this evening is Jonah's book. Now turn back with me to the book of Jonah. And the big question we need to ask when we come to any book of the Bible is, who was it written by, and who was it written for?

Now we aren't told who wrote it, but there are details in this book that only Jonah himself would know. So personally, I think this book was written by Jonah after the events, after everything had taken place.

So Jonah was written to the Israelites, the people that we were just thinking about in Jonah's background. Let me tell you why I think this. As you go through the book, you'll see that Jonah has certain ideas about who and where, to who, sorry, and where God's love and mercy should be shown.

And the whole point of this book is to help the readers see that God's love, God's compassion is not limited to a certain people in a certain place, but it extends far, far wider than we can even begin to imagine.

So if you're looking for a statement that summarizes Jonah and this sermon series, it is that the Lord saves. Let's dive into the specifics of the book itself.

[16 : 45] See, Jonah's one of those books that most people who've spent any time in church at all will have heard it. Children's Bible story books will normally have a story about it, but do we really understand what this book teaches?

For example, most of you, when you think about the book of Jonah, will think, and hopefully you can engage with me a little bit and join in and finish this sentence for me, Jonah and the whale.

Jonah or the big fish. That's immediately what we think about, isn't it? Well, Jonah has four chapters. It is made up of 48 verses, and guess how many of those are dedicated to the fish?

Two. Jonah 1.17. Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

And then in chapters 2, verse 10, and the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry ground. One mentioned when Jonah was swallowed and the next when he was spat out on the sea, on the beach.

[17 : 58] See, I don't think, I don't know, I don't think we know this book as well as we think we do. Because we associate it with an event that's actually only mentioned twice, or referenced twice, and in passing at that.

So what I want us to do is forget everything we know about Jonah and have the Bible inform our understanding of it. See, the book can be summarized like this.

God tells Jonah to go to a scary people, the Ninevites. Jonah runs the opposite way. Prophet goes to the sea, he's eaten by a fish. Jonah repents in that fish and is puked up on the beach.

Jonah goes to the bad people of Nineveh. They repent. Jonah is angry. And so usually the application that people come to when they read Jonah is, Jonah is a bad racist man.

Do not be like Jonah. But that doesn't quite fit. Because in the New Testament, in Luke 11, Jesus compares himself to Jonah.

[19 : 05] So surely we can't say that Jonah is bad and we shouldn't be like him. This book does raise a lot of questions that we'll get to over the next four weeks.

Questions like why is Jonah so angry, both of the Ninevites and at God? Why exactly didn't he want to go to the Ninevites? What are his motives behind all of this?

Why does this book end the way it does? See, Jonah isn't like any other prophetic book in the Old Testament. Most other books focus on the message of the prophet.

They're basically full of speeches that God has commissioned prophets to go and communicate to people, to call them to repent and turn to God. But Jonah isn't really about his message, but it's about his journey.

Jonah's actual message is in chapter 3, verse 4, where it says this, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. The shortest sermon you've ever heard in your life.

[20 : 11] A message that is actually only five words in the Hebrew language. See, Jonah's a bit like a Hollywood thriller movie. You know those movies, they're full of ups and downs, plot twists and turns.

One minute you think the main character will do one thing, but then you're left absolutely confused as it twists and they do something completely different. That's Jonah.

He is a classic example of Hebrew literature, which Archie will touch on next week. There are intricate structure, parallels, humour, irony, all put together in a masterpiece to help us see the truth that the Lord saves.

But why did Israel get this book? Well, my personal opinion is that Jonah wrote this after the events took place because he got home to the nation of Israel and he saw the danger of their view of God.

He saw how their understanding of God's love and mercy was restricted to them as a people. And so in humility, Jonah penned this book using himself as an example of that change that needed to happen in the hearts of Israel.

[21 : 28] See, it's as if Jonah got back to the land of Israel after all of this had happened, saw those attitudes that he saw in himself and he says, everyone come in, story time.

Let me tell you about a time in my life that you need to hear as well. See, this book focuses on God's control over all creation, people and planet alike and it is God's decision salvation who he showers his love and mercy on because it is the Lord who saves.

That's what this book will teach us. But the third and final thing I want us to think about this evening is Jonah's challenge. And by that I mean what this book means for us today.

So it presents us with that wonderful truth that the Lord saves. And the impact of that message has consequences on how we view ourselves as Christians and how we view and act towards non Christians around us.

See, as Christians we understand the gospel. We know the life-saving message of Jesus' death and resurrection which is wonderful but it can also produce pride in us.

[22 : 46] See, it can lead to what I call Christian snobbery. The idea that because of our faith we're somehow better than everyone else out there can lead to Christians looking down on others instead of showing them love and being witnesses to them like we were called to do.

This book also views, so challenges the way we view other people. Now Jonah did express a sense of toxic nationalism and racism towards the Ninevites.

As an outsider looking in on the city of Nineveh, Jonah saw a ruthless people, brutal in their attacks and who would stop at nothing to expand their borders.

Historical paintings and artifacts highlight the brutality of this kingdom that was, would become the biggest power at the time. and who would eventually attack and conquer the northern kingdom of Israel.

See, it's as if when Jonah heard God tell him, go and preach to Nineveh, he said, the Ninevites? Why would I preach to the Ninevites?

[24 : 03] They don't deserve a relationship with God. They only deserve punishment for their sins and their stupidity. they don't deserve forgiveness. Now, maybe we don't use those words, but that sentiment is alive today.

Because like Jonah, in our time of peace and plenty, we have forgotten the urgency and the necessity to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people as we've been thinking in the book of Acts in the morning service.

See, we're tempted to look at others and their conduct and think that we are superior to them and they don't deserve the gospel. We might see a non-Christian living out a party lifestyle and feeling the effects of that on their body, on their mental health, on their finances, and we might think they're being stupid.

What we should actually be doing is coming alongside that person because they're hurting. standing on the sidelines in judgment whilst people are hurting is never something we should do.

And it is not something the Bible tells us to do either. The problem was that Jonah looked at other people and all he saw was enemies instead of viewing them as people in need of God's salvation.

[25 : 30] See, Jonah looked at Nineveh and saw people deserving of judgment. Jesus looked at people and saw he saw all the chaotic worlds that we live in.

He saw the mess of their lives. He saw rebellion and sin. And what did he say? Matthew 9 verse 36 says, when he, Jesus, saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

So as you look out of the people on this world, they are not enemies. They are human beings made in the image of God who need to be told the life-changing message of Jesus.

And we need to remember that it is the Lord who saves. No amount of religiosity, no amount of moral living will ever be enough. Nobody is saved outside the saving work of God through his son, Jesus Christ.

And the turning point to an extent for Jonah was when he was in the belly of the fish. God worked out his sovereign plan by sending his man into the depths for three days and three nights.

[26 : 43] How does that change come about in our hearts? Well, through the greater servant, the ultimate servant of God, Jesus, the suffering servant who was nailed to a cross, murdered the though innocent, placed in a borrowed tomb for three days and yet who rose victorious, defeating sin, defeating death and bringing forgiveness to all who would call on his name.

That is the change of heart that we need in order to view this world not as enemies but to have compassion on them because they are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

God's love for you. God's love for you. God's love for you. This book, Jonah, challenges us and challenges our view of God, our view of others and our view of ourselves.

The message that it leaves ringing in our ears is the Lord saves. The book of Jonah ends with a question and is deliberately being written like that so that the reader can ask themselves that same question.

At the end of Jonah in chapter 4, God simply asks Jonah and I'm paraphrasing but he basically says, and we need this question today too, isn't it right, God says, for me to show love and mercy to all people, not only those that you think deserve it?

[28 : 13] So you think back to that movie recommendation from a friend. That turns out to be much more complex than they said it would be. Jonah is like that. On the surface, it is simple but it presents us with a lot of hard questions.

The book of Jonah isn't a kid's story that we can easily skip over because it's short and simple but it is part of God's word and it will challenge our minds, it will stretch our imagination of who God is and how he approaches people and it will encourage us to see that his limitless love and mercy extends way beyond we can even imagine to people who are harassed like sheep without a shepherd.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for the wonderful news that you alone are the one who saves. Father, forgive us for the times where we have looked down on others, where we have thought that we are superior because of our faith in you.

Lord, help us remember that we are solely saved by your grace and that nobody is deserving of salvation. But also, Lord, we ask that you would be with those who maybe think that they are beyond salvation, that they've done too much, that they've gone too far.

[29 : 49] As we journey through the book of Jonah, would the truth ring in their minds that there is no one who can out-sin God's grace? Father, would you lift our eyes to Jesus?

And would we be better disciples of him as we wrestle with the book of Jonah? We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.