



A Great God

Jonah

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Speaker:
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Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amitai, 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 Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. 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. 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. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. 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." 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 they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And 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." Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. 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 you." So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

After giving it some thought, I decided a few weeks ago that when we resumed our meetings I'd speak from the book of Jonah.

The short story was centuries ago subdivided into four chapters; and since these are four logical chunks of the story, my plan is to deliver one message per chapter. If God helps me, I'll bring out the main teachings of the book and, more importantly, show how these relate to the salvation found in Jesus Christ.

It's always been the case that the most prominent feature of the story of Jonah is relatively insignificant. Of the untold thousands of children's books written about Jonah, I doubt there's a single one that doesn't have a picture of a great big whale on the front.

Writers of children's books of course want to find those elements that will grab the attention of the average child. And most of these books major on the big fish and so leave children with the wrong impression.

Having a short while ago listened to the book being read again, we're reminded that the fish is mentioned in just two verses. God had his reasons for introducing this bizarre element into Jonah's story, but it has no real bearing on any of the things I want to bring out.

I suppose I should just comment on this issue of Jonah being swallowed by a big fish because some people find it too hard to believe. A very small number of Bible commentators have claimed the whole episode with the fish was a metaphor for Jonah's depression. But it tells us the fish was appointed by the Lord. We also find Jesus referring to Jonah's time inside this creature to picture his own descent into the grave.

Outside of Scripture, I'm aware of just one historical account of a man being swallowed by a whale. One had been caught and was being prepared by their whalers. When its stomach was exposed, they saw something move inside it. It was a man...and he was alive!

There are serious doubts whether this really took place. But it might interest you to know that only a few weeks ago, a whale did in fact swallow a sailor who'd fallen overboard. The whale had swallowed him unintentionally. He thought he was going to die in there. Then he saw a circle of white light as the whale's mouth opened. The creature shook its head violently and the seaman was flung out. He was taken to hospital with some broken bones.

By rights, if someone was swallowed by one of the sea creatures able to do so, the victim would soon be dead. They'd either suffocate or be slowly burned by stomach acids. So this leads us to understand that God used natural means with Jonah but miraculously preserved his life.

Jonah was from a small town not far from where Jesus would live, in Nazareth. He's mentioned as a prophet in the second book of Kings and chapter 14 if you wish to look that up later. His hometown has now become the modern village of el-Meshhed. If you visit the place, you'll be shown what they claim is Jonah's tomb.

When it says Jonah fled to Joppa, you might recognise that place name. It was here that several hundred years later, the apostle Peter would have his vision of the impure animals. It's also from there Peter went to visit Cornelius the centurion. You can find that in Acts chapter 10.

The main theme of the book then has nothing to do with a giant sea creature. **The overall message is about God's grace and mercy shown to undeserving sinners.** We're reminded that the gift of repentance and faith is given to whoever the sovereign Lord sees fit. He as it were responds to people repentance, but it's a repentance which he himself gave.

As we consider Jonah trying to escape God's calling, we should take that as a warning that running from God's will is pointless and only invites trouble. For that reason, there's a lesson in there for both unbelievers and believers alike.

When I read this book of Jonah again and meditated on it, something new stood out for me. The word *great* cropped up several times. An investigation into that word showed it's seen in other forms translated in a different way. So apart from a great city, we hear of a *great* tempest, *great* fear among the sailors, and a *great* fish.

I concluded there was a reason the author had been inspired to use that word so much. And I realised **everything described as great, mighty or exceeding in this book says something about the greatness of God**. I've chosen three references on which to base my message today.

A Great City

By the standards of that day, Nineveh was a significant city. It would eventually become the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Given the clues in this book, Bible students have tried to work out how big Nineveh was. There are some ideas we can quite confidently dismiss. When it says Nineveh was a city of "three days journey", we might be tempted to read that as meaning it took three days to get from one side to the other. But that would mean it was a city 30 to 50 miles in diameter. No ancient city at that time came close to being that big.

There are two likely explanations. Firstly, it could mean it took three days to get around the city. In other words, it would take Jonah three days to preach in each quarter of the city. Secondly, the description could be referring not to Nineveh proper but "Greater Nineveh".

We can use a modern and local example to make the point. When we refer to Manchester, we could be referring to the city proper or to *Greater Manchester*, which includes many other towns. In the same way, there were numerous cities around Nineveh, and to travel from one side of this larger area to the other would indeed have taken several days.

The Assyrians were cruel people. They were infamous for the cruelly inventive ways they tortured and killed their prisoners. And they weren't ashamed of their violence; they immortalised their savagery in art. Stone carvings exist to this day showing the Assyrians impaling people, flaying the skin off prisoners, taking people's heads off, and so on.

It's the most natural thing in the world to detest savagery and hope that it receives due punishment. I sometimes watch these US crime documentaries with Karen. And you see some home invader who kills a family and makes off with \$20. And in these programs, the culprit always gets caught. And I find myself hoping they've been found guilty in a US state that has capital punishment. I know it's a controversial subject even among the Lord's people, but it just feels that justice has really been done if the criminal is put to death by the state.

I'm sharing this just to provide an example of how this deep-down desire for justice can lead to us wanting savage people to die. And so hopefully you'll have some sympathy with the attitude of people like Jonah, who seemed reluctant for the cruel enemies of Israel to be given an opportunity to repent.

But if our thinking is in line with God's, we'll want the state to wield a sword of justice righteously *but we'll far more greatly desire the salvation* of the wicked.

We may just find ourselves having a sinful attitude towards the lost in our own day. When we pray for God to have mercy, it's easier to pray for some respectable person who visits our church one day from the local area than it is to pray for a gang of thugs who've vandalised the church and threatened the congregation with violence.

We need to remind ourselves that with God nothing is impossible. Although salvation comes at a great cost to God, he can as easily save a violent thug as he can a respectable churchgoer. And when he does these things, isn't it more marvellous in our eyes? When a murderer turns to Jesus Christ for full and free salvation, we often describe that person as a "trophy of God's grace", such is the magnitude of the transformation between the man before and afterwards.

In our account, God had commissioned Jonah to take a message of impending judgement to the Ninevites. Their general wickedness—and particular hatred for God's people—had reached a level which caused God to announce their soon destruction.

And from this description of the city as being "great", we learn that *God himself* is great. In his threat, made through the mouth of Jonah, he shows that even the largest city of men cannot withstand his judgement should it fall on them. We think about the advanced but wicked cities of the plain back in Abraham's day. Sodom, and its sister towns, were devastated by the Lord.

He's a God of great might and power. And saying he has great power is obviously an understatement. He is ALMIGHTY. ALL-POWERFUL. And this means he can also burn this entire world of ours to the ground. Many believers think this is what God's going to do when he shuts down as world.

However he does it, the world that you and I know **is** coming to an end. All the streets and houses eradicated. All the great skyscrapers reduced to nothing. And more shocking is the fate of mankind itself. All those who have died throughout history in rebellion to God will be resurrected. But it won't be a glorious resurrection but a damned one. They, together with all the haters of God who are alive at the time, will be judged. Through an abundance of evidence against them, the ruling for all will be "guilty" and the sentence the outer darkness. They will have eternity to regret their opposition to God and his people.

And this should sadden us. You see, although we happily bow before the sovereign will of God, knowing he will be glorified in his judgement of the wicked, *we at the same time maintain a feeling of regret*. It's not going against God's expressed wishes to feel like that. It's because we recognise the only reason we're not part of that doomed multitude is the grace of God.

We pray for the salvation of people in our circle of family and friends, not knowing whether they're God's elect or not. And the spirit of our prayers is one of pleading for their salvation but ultimately desiring *God's will be done* if its difference from our will.

That great city, Nineveh. That great mega city, planet Earth. God will do with them as he sees fit, and we'll glorify him for it.

But then there's the flipside to this fact. **The greatness of God also means that no city is too big, or too wicked, for God to have mercy on them.** I very much doubt whether God deals with people according to geographical locations anymore. We all know his church is no longer confined to one place but can be found peppered throughout every nation in the world.

When we talk about the greatness of God seen in his mercy today, we need to remember he's still able to save large numbers of people in a short space of time. His practice throughout church history seems to be to draw in his elect people in their ones and twos, here and there, steadily increasing the size of his kingdom. But we should at least be open to the possibility that any incidence of the preaching of the gospel can be used by God to save many, many people.

And again, we remind ourselves that no one is too wicked for the mercy of God to have its way. People in the world often have trouble believing murderers, rapists, paedophiles, animal abusers and so on can have their sins forgiven by God. The reason they can't believe this is they place those type of people in their "bad" category but place themselves in the "good" category. They're blind to the magnitude of their own sin and think of sin as those extreme behaviours that get people locked up in jail for years.

How unbelievable it will be to these people at the judgement when they see some of the vilest people who've ever lived standing in the ranks of the redeemed, having had their sins forgiven and awaiting entry into the glorious eternal life God has promised for them. Meanwhile, the people who haven't done those extreme things will have to face the reality that something as simple as their pride is enough to damn them.

For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised. He also is to be feared above all gods.

1 Chronicles 16:25

A Great Storm

Jonah had decided he didn't want to take on this particular mission. He came up with a cunning plan. He'd run away from God! I don't know whether Jonah was out of his mind at that point and genuinely thought if he got far away God would leave him alone or couldn't reach him. Alternatively, it could be he wanted to get as far away as possible so that even if God did drag him back kicking and screaming it would take more time. So it could have been a delay tactic.

Either way, he didn't want the Ninevites to hear the word of the Lord. He goes down to the seaport and gets on a boat going to Tarshish. We don't know where that is for certain, but it could well be in southern Spain.

And we read that God sent a mighty tempest which put the boat in serious danger. These experienced mariners were frightened, so they must have viewed this storm as very serious.

It was normal practice in those situations to dump the cargo. A lighter ship was less likely to sink, of course.

They also called out to their gods. The heathen had numerous gods. The gods for the sea, the land, the sky, and so on. There was the hope if they prayed to as many gods as possible, it was more likely they'd find one who was sympathetic to their plight.

Eventually, the captain finds his passenger Jonah asleep down below. He shouts at him to get up and start praying to whatever god he believes in.

At some point, it was decided that their fate was as a result of the gods being angry at someone on board. To find out who it was, they used lots. It was a common enough practice in those days, and you may recall it was used by the Lord's apostles on one occasion. There were different methods used.

Surprise, surprise, Jonah's name came out. They quizzed him. They want to know where he was from and other things. Presumably, this would help them understand which god had been offended.

We note here how God's sovereignty overruled their superstitious practice. He ensured Jonah was identified as the culprit.

But God's power is seen most clearly in the storm itself. The sailors would soon learn that Jonah's God had power over all creation. He had the power to raise storms and quell them. And a God who has power to control the movement of an immeasurably heavy body of water could do anything.

When he's quizzed, Jonah comes out with a short confession of faith. He tells them he's one of the Hebrews and he serves the very God who *made* the heavens and the earth.

Friends, when we come to accept God created the heavens and the earth, we'll believe he can do anything. Curiously, some people have difficulty believing certain miracles in the Bible. It's usually because they're quite bizarre ones. If you ever find yourself thinking that way, remind yourself about the creation. I trust that you believe God is the creator of this universe. And any miracle that he performs within his created universe demands less power than the creation itself. So we should have no doubt about his ability to perform any miracle.

A Great Fear

What do we see next in our story? Jonah has made this declaration. And it's when the sailors hear about which god has been offended, they become terrified. You see, they'll have been familiar with the god of the Hebrews. They'll know that their god secured them a place in Canaan, overthrowing all the previous inhabitants. And perhaps they'd heard numerous other stories about how that God, Jehovah, had done mighty miracles for his people.

The reputation of God was such that these men were greatly afraid. They also seem to believe Jonah would have the solution to their predicament, so they ask him. The prophet tells them the harsh truth that it's only by throwing him in the sea God would leave them alone.

The captain's reaction is quite remarkable. Even though he's convinced throwing Jonah overboard will get this Jehovah off their backs, he won't do it. He says to his men, *There's no way we're doing that, fellas. He'll drown, without a doubt. Grab the oars—we're going to row like mad!*

Taking control of the boat through rowing was unlikely to succeed. And it won't have escaped Jonah's notice that they were doing everything they could to avoid him being killed. Even though these pagans knew it was Jonah's fault their lives were in danger, they had the courage and the grace to avoid harming him.

But their efforts were doomed to failure. They abandoned their rowing. They knew what had to be done. And here's where it gets even more interesting. *They start praying to God.* Not their gods but Jehovah himself. Knowing they'll have to sacrifice Jonah for the safety of the crew, they beg Jehovah to not hold this against them. They even acknowledge God's sovereignty!

These pagans showed the eternal moral principles of God built into the human heart. Despite believing in all kinds of invented gods, they knew deep down that to take the life of another was a serious matter.

It's hard to work out whether Jonah was making this confession as the beginning of a period of repentance, or it was something altogether less noble. Perhaps he saw this as a way for his life to be ended. He'd be dead, but at least he wouldn't have to preach to those scumbags in Nineveh.

They throw him in. Straightaway, the storm settles down.

You'll remember from our journey through the gospel of Mark over this past year and a half how at one point Jesus calmed a storm. Let's remind ourselves of the reaction of the people when this happened. It can be found in Mark's fourth chapter and verse 41:

And they feared exceedingly and said one to another, "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Mark 4:41

When we consider this great power God has over his creation, it should give us that confidence that he's able to save the most hardened rebel who lives. We should never think of a person, *God will never save him.* The God who has power over the elements has the power to fundamentally change the character of a person by the Holy Spirit. Can't we each testify to that?

Go and bear witness for God, brothers and sisters. There will be people out there who want to know about God but no one will tell them. There could be many who are just waiting for someone to have the courage to tell them about forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.

When the sailors saw the storm calmed, they were overcome with fear; because it was at this point they realised the real power of Jehovah. And so it was they offered up prayer and praise to the God who is above all gods.

Jonah was the one who claimed to fear Jehovah, but it was the pagan sailors who were most ready to offer up adoration and worship to him. Jonah snubbed God's command, but the pagans showed God due reverence.

Israelites who read about all this after the event would've been shocked to learn about the spiritual sensitivity of these heathen men. It would undermine their belief that the heathen were unworthy of God's favour. It would show them it's his purpose to save people from among all the nations not just Israel.

The chapter ends with the well-known incident with the giant sea creature. The whale, or the shark, or whatever it was, swallowed Jonah.

It's in the knowledge that God is mighty that men and women learn to fear him. It's when they realise he has the power over life and death that they understand he's the one they have to face. He's the one they have to get right with.

Fear of God is not spoken of much today from the pulpits. Even when the churches take the gospel out to the lost, more often than not the message is what a great friend Jesus is for them.

Christians are still people. Our natural inclinations are the same. We don't like confrontation. We prefer people to like us and not dislike us. And I think this is why many Christians prefer a positive approach to witnessing rather than what they see as a negative approach. A positive presentation would tell people God will be their friend if only they will allow him to be. It will sell the benefits of being a citizen of God's kingdom. It will use the promise of eternal life to incentivise people. And in this way, the world says how "nice" those Christians are.

All these things are partly true, of course. The person who turns to God in repentance *will* find God to be a great friend. There *are* present benefits to being God's kingdom, such as peace and joy through the knowledge of forgiveness of sins. And there *is* a wonderful eternity prepared for all those who trust in Jesus Christ. All that's true.

But we must tell people about what God is like altogether. Not what he's like to those who become his friends, but what his attitude is right now.

- They need to know he's the creator of the heavens and the earth
- They need to understand his almighty nature
- They need to accept his absolute sovereignty in the management of his creation
- They need to be told, as they stand right now, they're under the condemnation of an angry God.

Fear of God is a good thing. It's a *beautiful* thing. We're told it's fear of the Lord that leads to true wisdom. It's the rebels' *fear* of God which will drive them to repent like the people of Nineveh and ask for mercy.

And what if we don't tell people that God is awesome and terrible and almighty? What if they never learn that this God is the one who will judge all mankind? If we get them to make some sort of profession, what type of God will they be trusting in? Will they ever appreciate the sacrifice of Calvary if they have no idea of God's might and holiness?

My view may be a minority one in evangelicalism. But **I'm all in favour of the people of this world being told there's a God to be feared.** I believe **we should tell them about how detestable sin is to God.** We should shock them by telling them **the perfect righteousness which is required for them to escape God's fury.** We should warn them **there most certainly is a judgement coming and they'll be present.**

What about you, Christian friend? Do **you** fear God? You might think it's inappropriate for a Christian who has access to the throne of God to fear him in any sense of the word. You might think fear is something to be felt by those who are still in rebellion to God.

But I'd encourage you to fear him still. Yes, it's a different type of fear. The threat of destruction has gone. The God who's to be feared is now your father and you're his beloved child.

But fear him still. Remember his great power. Remember the great mercy he's shown to you. And then you'll be able to approach him boldly in prayer, yet all the while having a reverential fear because of who he is. And then you can joyfully confess to him that he is "a great God, and greatly to be praised".

Amen.