

Runaway Prophet — Jonah 1

Preached at 8.15 and C@6 on 28th August 2016

Intro

What's not your favourite fishing story - being caught BY a fish!

It isn't a story about a whale - it doesn't even say it's a whale!

It's a story about the merciful and compassionate God of all the earth.

So let's get straight into it!

The God of Compassion

The book begins with:

"The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:" (Jonah 1:1 NIV)

Notice that 'LORD' is in capitals, which means it's standing in for the special name God used to make himself known to the Israelites when he rescued them from Egypt... sometimes written and pronounced as 'Yahweh' or 'Jehovah'.

That detail is important for our understanding of the story — because the story is actually all about this God.

When he speaks to Moses out of the burning bush he identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He's the God who promised Abraham that he would bring blessing to all the nations through his descendants, the Israelites.

Israel was called to be a blessing to people of all nations...

The God they worship is a merciful and compassionate God...

"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." (Exodus 33:19 NIV)

Israel had experienced his mercy and compassion when he rescued them from Egypt for no other reason than that it was his will.

The Israelites deserved his judgment as much as any other people group, but he shows them mercy and compassion in place of his judgment.

So the book begins with this righteous, merciful God of all the earth speaking.

The LORD has compassion and shows mercy to sinners through his word, calling us to repent and submit to him as the true Lord of all.

And it's the word of the LORD in v1 that initiates everything else that happens in the book.

The Runaway Prophet

Enter the co-star — Jonah, son of Amittai.

Jonah was an eighth century BC prophet whose ministry coincided with reign of Jeroboam II, king of the northern tribes of Israel from 782-753BC.

We read about Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25ff where he prophesied about the restoration of Israel's borders — something that happened under Jeroboam's rule.

Because of the exceptional events of the story of Jonah some commentators have suggested that Jonah is a wisdom story rather than a factual account.

Verse 1 helps us here because the phrase “the word of the LORD came to...” is never used in the Bible about anyone other than a real prophet who's actually given a word from God to preach.

Secondly, in Matthew 12 Jesus talks about the sign of Jonah, and links it to the historical act of repentance by the people of Nineveh.

The word of the LORD that came to Jonah is a message of warning for the people of Nineveh about the imminent judgment of God.

Friends, as we speak the gospel we must not leave out the imminent judgment of God.

We shy away from telling people that they're facing God's judgment. The mood of the world at the moment means we're not supposed to say that someone is wrong — and that's what we're effectively saying. That's the first reaction I had to the gospel when I became a Christian — "I'm in the wrong with God".

That's one of the reasons we might run away from an opportunity to share the gospel.

But as we move through the book we'll see *that* isn't really the problem that causes Jonah to pack up and run... which is what he does.

Notice in vv2-3 how intentional he is in running away.

This isn't a mindless reaction — he's prepared and even paid for the trip to Tarshish.

But he's foolish to think that he could go somewhere that God wasn't.

You can't go anywhere that God isn't. There's no part of your life that God doesn't see or isn't aware of.

Jonah's actions sound even comical here... but so many people treat God the same way — like if I ignore him or pretend he doesn't exist he'll leave me alone... like a child thinking you can't see them because they've put their hand over their eyes.

The wind and storm that come up in v5 are proof that God is right there with his disobedient prophet, and that he's angry about his disobedience.

...

One of the benefits of the Bible Overview we did last term was to help us to read the Bible in context, and that will really help us here.

Firstly the geographical context shows us that Nineveh is the capital of Assyria.

We know from reading the historical book of Kings that Assyria is the powerful northern enemy of Israel.

Assyria had perfected the art of intimidating its smaller neighbours into submission to its empire.

Then there's the historical context.

In the time of Jeroboam II Assyria had a temporary loss of some of its power, which had enabled Israel to re-establish some of her borders against her enemy — and that was in fulfilment of the message Jonah had preached.

So it's in this context that Jonah is now being called by the compassionate, merciful God to go and preach in the capital city of Israel's great enemy, warning the people there of coming judgment... and knowing that He is a God who forgives...

“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” (Exodus 34:6–7 NIV)

Can you begin to see Jonah's issue with preaching the word he's been given?

It's not that he's nervous or afraid.

It's actually that he has a very small concept of who God is and of God's purposes for the world.

Yahweh is the God of Israel — he should be smacking Israel's enemies down — not forgiving them!

If he goes warning the Ninevites about the judgment to come, and they hear and repent, he knows Yahweh will have compassion on them and forgive them — because that's who Yahweh, the LORD, is and he doesn't change or play favourites.

But Jonah has lost sight of the fact that God's compassion and forgiveness are as much for Israel's enemies as for Israel.

We lose sight of the great scope of God's grace and compassion too when we lose sight of the fact that his message of warning and his offer of forgiveness are as much for those who hate us as it is for us.

Remember Jesus said we're to love our enemies?

The Muslim cleric who preaches hate against what he sees as the Christian West, needs to hear the word of the compassionate, forgiving Judge of all people in the gospel.

The same-sex marriage lobbyist and the people trying to get Scripture thrown out of schools... the gospel is for them too — not just us.

Jesus is not just the Lord of Christians — he's the Lord of all the earth.

And he's spoken to us and given us the message that all the earth — even our enemies — need to hear: repent and believe in him.

We'll come back to Jonah before we finish, but there's another group of people in this chapter — the sailors.

The Saved Gentiles

I don't know how bad a storm has to be before sailors start fearing for their lives.

We've been on a cruise ship that's rocking around a bit and making us feel a bit nervous, but the staff and crew are going about their jobs as if they're on dry land!

In v5 it says these sailors were in fear of their lives.

But we see a miraculous transformation in them, that also helps us to see just how wrong Jonah is.

In fear they each start crying out to their own god.

Pagan gods were thought to control geographical localities or particular elements like the weather.

So it was like a lottery — hoping they'd eventually be heard by the right god who could stop the storm.

When that failed, the captain wakes the sleeping prophet to shoot up a prayer to his god to see if he can do anything.

But Jonah doesn't pray. He doesn't even own up to who his God is until it's dragged out of him... even though he knows that the lives of these sailors are under threat because of his disobedience.

When they eventually drag it out of him he tells them in v9 that he worships the LORD, Yahweh, the lord of all creation.

And the sailors are terrified.

They want to know what the LORD wants them to do make the storm stop.

Jonah's solution is for them to throw him overboard into the sea — but I want to leave Jonah's reason for saying this to one side for a moment and focus on the sailors.

They actually fear the LORD more than Jonah does.

And they have more respect for Jonah's life as one of the LORD's people than Jonah does — initially refusing to throw him to his death and doing everything they can to spare his life and their own.

But by v14 you see an amazing transformation has taken place.

Just through the very little Jonah has told them about his God, and the demonstration of his power in the storm, they've believed that the LORD is the God that they're all accountable to for their actions.

Even in their imperfect newborn faith — as they comply with Jonah's request and throw him overboard — they pray to the true God!

They pray he won't hold this sin against them, acknowledging that God is sovereign even in this.

And after they do throw Jonah overboard and the storm is calmed, they show the greatest sign of true wisdom — they fear the LORD, making vows to him and sacrificing to him — presumably once they'd reached land and had something to sacrifice.

Even through the little they get to hear about the God of heaven who made the sea and the land from this reluctant prophet, God saves them.

...not just temporarily as they escape the storm, but permanently in a new right relationship with the true God.

The Reluctant Prophet

Briefly, back to Jonah...

There's nothing here to suggest that God commanded Jonah to have himself thrown overboard.

Jonah is driven by self-pity more than any concern for the sailors' welfare.

In short, he would rather die than face the shame of being the one who warned Israel's enemies to repent or face God's judgment.

Personally for Jonah, that meant he would rather die himself, than repent of his actions and obey God.

And there we see the similarity between Jonah and Jesus evaporate...

Because Jesus willingly died rather than disobey God.

And his obedience has brought salvation for the world to everyone who has believed his call to repent and believe the good news.

As chapter 1 ends (at v16) the lives of the repentant sailors have been spared.

But the life of God's unrepentant runaway prophet is still under threat beneath the waves, and the story continues next week.

Reluctant Prophets?

Friends, we worship the same compassionate, forgiving God who called Jonah.

He's called us to proclaim the gospel that warns people of his coming judgment and calls them to repent and believe in Jesus, the Lord and Saviour of all people.

We mustn't be people who think like Jonah — that we have the right to decide who gets to hear the gospel and who doesn't.

We need to work on growing a heart of compassion for all the lost — even those who hate or despise us — if we're going to be useful to God.

The only way to grow that heart of compassion is to focus every day on the compassion God has had on us in inviting us into the gathering of his people through the saving message of the death and resurrection of Jesus.