

## **Sermon 1: Jonah 1:1-3: Jonah's flight**

### **OUTLINE**

Jonah forgot grace  
Jonah forgot God

### **INTRODUCTION**

When I say, 'the book of Jonah' what comes to mind? For most of us we think of that memorable story of a runaway prophet from Sunday school. As you get older you may think about the controversy over whether the miracle of the big fish happened, there is no mention of a whale. And perhaps you have even heard about whether Jonah is in fact a real historical narrative or an allegorical story meant to convict a racist and nationalistic Israel. The real hero of the book of Jonah is God not Jonah. When you get to the end of the book of Jonah we don't even know whether the sulking Jonah has learnt his lesson and now agrees that God should be merciful to Nineveh. We believe that the story of Jonah is historical, just as Jesus thought that it was Luke 11:29-32. We also believe that the event with the big fish is a real miracle. Some have tried to say that the event is staged, but unlike so many false miracles it is not squeezed for all its worth but merely mentioned in passing. As memorable as these things are they are not the focus, God is.

As with the parable of the prodigal son, the older brother and the younger brother are used as a backdrop to emphasize God's grace to all types of sinners, so Jonah who has incidentally been pointed out to imitate both brothers in the parable is also backdrop to highlighting God's grace to sinners.

Jonah prophesied at about 760 BC. The book of Jonah is thought to be the earliest recorded prophecy of the major and minor prophets. Jonah was likely contemporary with Elisha and one of his disciples. Jonah lived about 150 years after Solomon and the split between the 10 Northern tribes and the 2 Southern tribes, Jonah was a prophet of the Northern kingdom. He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II. The name Jonah means, 'dove'. Although a symbol of the Holy Spirit, it also bears the connotation of being senseless, "Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria." (Hos. 7:11). So then, as with many other names of the prophets, Jonah's is ironically telling. In v1 we see that Jonah is the 'son of Amittai.' This too has significance in the case of Jonah, as it means, 'son of my faithfulness,' highlighting how God is faithful to an unfaithful son.

Today as we begin our look into Jonah we will be focusing on v1-3 where God calls Jonah but Jonah flees. We want to look at how Jonah forgets grace and forgets who God is. We will see today the Jonah is typical of us as believers, and the road to disobedience is the same for all it begins with forgetting God's grace and who God is.

### **Jonah forgot grace**

Outside the book of Jonah there is no mention of him in the OT except in 2 Kings 14:23-27, 'In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. <sup>24</sup> And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. <sup>25</sup> He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of

Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. <sup>26</sup> For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. <sup>27</sup> But the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.'

This little section in 2 Kings is very helpful for us to understand more of Jonah's background. Firstly, we must note that this was during the rise of the nation of Assyria into being the great power of that area. 722 BC is when Assyria seizes Samaria, Jonah is in 760 about 40 years prior to that event. The Assyrians were known for their cruelty. They would cut off lips and hands, they would force captives to carry around the heads of their loved ones on poles. Jonah we are told comes from the town of Gath-hepher, which belonged to the tribe of Zebulun in the northernmost parts of Israel which would have been a frontline where Assyrians influence would come. This means that Jonah probably had family members who had been affected by Assyrians invasion.

These verses reveal to us that Jeroboam was an evil king, however there is a big surprise. Contrary to God's ordinary ways in punishing Israel when their kings were bad, we see that God used Jeroboam to take back lands that had been formerly captured and took it back to the borders under Solomon. Assyria has ravaged Israel, Israel had been weakened, and even though they were sinful God through the prophetic ministry of Jonah restored previous borderlands to Israel and blessed them even though they did not deserve it. Assyria at this time are rocked by internal conflict and focusing elsewhere so Jeroboam is given a window to restore Israel's borders. V26-27 are telling because they emphasize the compassion of God who saw how bitter things were for them, and that there was no one else to save them, and v27 stresses God's faithfulness and mercy in not allowing them to be wiped out. Jonah had been the bearer of good news to an unworthy people, he had been a messenger of grace. He had experienced first-hand that God is merciful and gracious and takes pity upon the unworthy.

This is Jonah's background and now we are ready to look at v1-3, 'Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." <sup>3</sup> 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.'

Jonah's calling as a prophet is unique. He is not called to preach to the people of God in this instance but to Gentiles. He is not prosecuting them according to the covenant of Moses calling them back to be faithful to the Mosaic covenant as if he were in Israel. No instead he represents God who is Lord over all people and who has felt the need to address the terrible evil in Assyria, in particularly its capital Nineveh. But we see that instead of answering God's call and going to Nineveh Jonah runs in the opposite direction, to Tarshish which is thought to be somewhere in Spain.

The central reason for Jonah being disobedient from the Lord was a simple one. He knew that God would forgive the Ninevites if they repented, and he did not want them to be forgiven but to be judged. Jonah tells us this himself in 4:2, 'And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.' Jonah was happy for God to be good to his own family, and hometown and nation when they did not deserve it, but he

was not happy when God forgave Israel's enemies. Sadly this is a very common way in which we all forget God's grace.

The drama between the Ninevites and Jonah has been compared to the animosity between the Publicans and the Pharisees in the gospel. Think on what we know about the gospels, the parable of the prodigal son is a helpful window. On the one hand you have the sinners, the publicans who were outright disobeying God's laws. Then on the other side you had the religious establishment who were attempting to use religious righteousness as a means to earn God's favour and bring in the kingdom. Sinners were seen as unpatriotic and part of the problem for why Rome was oppressing Israel. When Jesus came along and began to hang out with sinners in order to preach to them, the fact that He loved them and was compassionate towards them did not go down well with the Pharisees. There are several lessons we can learn from Jesus as He engaged with them.

In the parable of the prodigal son we see two ways to be sinful, two ways to be separated from the Father and two ways to hell. The younger brother shamed the Father by demanding his inheritance and shaming Him before the household and town. The older brother also shames the Father by publicly standing outside and refuses to come in arguing and accusing the Father.

When the younger brother was reinstated as a son, he would have received another 1/3 part in the inheritance, a part of the older brother's share. We see in the older brother's anger all the sin that exposes his own alienated and lost condition. The younger brother did not want the Father, delighting in Him and what He wanted, nor did the older brother, his anger was in part due to the loss of his part in the inheritance.

The older brother's anger exposes him to us. Let's observe his words in Luke 15:29-30, 'but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' it is important for us to see that the older brother thinks that he is good and that God owes him good on the basis of his goodness, and therefore by this measure the younger brother should be rejected.

We see the older brother speaking without addressing His Father correctly by starting with the word 'look'. But the root of the matter is exposed when the older brother reveals that God has been unjust and that he feels hard done by because 'these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command.' 'You owe me, not him.' That is what the older brother is stating. And by stating this he is revealing his view of God, himself and salvation. The good deserve to be saved, the bad do not deserve anything good. You can know whether you are like the older brother and are failing to see your sin and what you actually deserve by whether you get angry at God when you don't get what you think you deserve, or if you experience bad. Think upon those times when you have suffered in health or finances, or some other painful way, and think whether you accused God of not seeing your good deeds. Only a person who thinks they are innocent complains that God is not giving them what they think they deserve. Those who are not Christians think this everyday blaming God for all the bad things that happen to good people forgetting that any

life or breath we have is a mercy that is undeserved because if God were to give us what we deserve we would go to hell. Christians likewise have amnesia and fall into this way of thinking accusing God thinking that our goodness should have bought us some relief.

We see too that the older brother served the father and obeyed but it was not because of love, if so, he would not be complaining at but rejoicing with the Father, for His joys would be our joys if we truly loved God and not merely ourselves. This reveals that the older brother's service is conditional and is seen as a duty. Keller tells the story from the play *Amadeus*, a play about the composer Mozart. Salieri is like the older brother, he is an aspiring composer and prays as a boy, 'Lord, make me a great composer! Let me celebrate your glory through music—and be celebrated myself! Make me famous through the world, dear God! Make me immortal! After I die let people speak my name forever with love for what I wrote! In return I vow I will give you my chastity, my industry, my deepest humility, every hour of my life. And I will help my fellow man all I can.' He kept this vow until Mozart the musical genius comes along. Mozart is immoral and yet the most brilliant composer who has ever lived. Salieri cannot bide this and Salieri says to God, 'From now on we are enemies, you and I.' All Salieri's good deeds are exposed as being for self by the anger when he does not get what he thinks are his dues. Likewise the older brother is angry at the Father's generosity when he has been working himself to the bone under a works mentality to try and enjoy the Father's gifts. The freeness of the grace chaffs the one who is working for heaven. All his obedience was for self.

We see that he grudges the generosity of the father when someone has not worked for it, he complains that the Father has not even given him a goat but has killed the fatted calf for the profligate. We see in this that the older brother has no security in the Father's love. It is always true that those who are working for their salvation, those who are trusting in what they offer to God, they can never be assured that the Father loves them. It is only when we see that it is through Christ alone that we can be made righteous and accepted, that there is no one who is too sinful to be saved, and that God delights to freely and fully forgive for Christ's sake, then we will have true joy.

The older brother does not recognise the younger brother's inclusion back into the family. We see that he uses the words, 'this son of yours.' And this reveals that those who do not know their own sin and need for grace, those who are so focused on others sins that they cannot see their own, that they cannot think of themselves to be one family with someone who isn't good like them.

What is ironic about this parable is that in the two others like it in the chapter there was someone who went searching for what was lost, but in this parable who should have been out there searching? It should have been the older brother who was out there looking and pleading with his brother to come home but he wasn't. What is revealed is that he knew all about how the younger brother was spending his money, 'on prostitutes' but he did not take the time to go and try and rescue him. The other ironic thing is that at the end of this parable who is in fellowship with God, the older or the younger brother? The younger brother is reconciled and the older brother is standing outside arguing with the Father. Please see the compassion of Jesus towards older brothers, He portrays the Father as

'entreating' the older brother, their compassion and grace to all sinners in this parable not only the profligate.

Jonah forgetting the grace he has received from the Father runs from the Ninevites not to them, he seeks to act to secure their judgement not salvation, this is the sinful heart within each one of us. Have you ever found yourself silently happy at the shootings at a gay club or the mass mosque shootings? Have you found your heart happy at the fall of your enemies? Have you ever been happy to report the sins of famous Christians of a different denomination to yourself? When we forget that we too are sinners, this lack of love fills us.

### **Jonah forgot God**

The question we have to ask ourselves is, why did Jonah run? You could argue that Jonah was fearful, this would be perfectly understandable. Someone has compared Jonah to a Rabbi being asked to preach in Berlin during WWII. Fear of man can drive us from our obedience to God. It should be emphasized that obedience to God is always worth more than your life. God's honor in being obeyed is more important than our comfort. It is not a case of God and I being equal and my life outweighs His will when it comes down to it. No, my life can never be better given than in putting on display the worth of my God that He is worth more than my life. I don't doubt that fear may have been a part of what Jonah was feeling, the task he was called to like Moses was a hard one. We have already established that he did not want Assyria to know grace as his main reason.

But Jonah exposes our own hearts to us here. Have you ever disagreed with God's commands, perhaps you think they are unreasonable or asking too much? God commands you to be holy but you think that God's laws about sexual purity or who you can marry are not suitable. Jonah forgot that God is God and has all authority to command us. We are His, we are not God. God's command to preach did not agree with Jonah's racism and hatred and desire for revenge against the Ninevites. God has every right to demand hard things of us which are right, He is God. Our disobedience is a forgetting of this fact about God.

There is another text that tells us that Jonah forgot God, twice our verses tell us that Jonah sought to flee 'from the presence of the Lord.' Let me ask you, is there anywhere you can go to get away from God? Psalm 139:7-12, 'Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.' We can never escape God in our sins. He sees all things, He knows all things, He is everywhere. Jonah was fleeing the place where God's name was. Jonah in his heart was running from conviction of sin. Jonah was running from any other believers and perhaps even prophets who would convict him to do the right thing. Jonah is a picture of our own hearts who think that they can run from God. We will never escape His presence.

There is one last way in which Jonah has forgotten God. God is the God of all nations, He sees the sins of Assyria and takes them seriously. But Jonah by his actions implied that God was only a local deity concerned to bless Israel and not the God of all the earth. We can do this as well. We make God center on us and not on others. We get angry at Him when His will disrupts our lives so that we have to serve others. We want God to see us as the center of our universes just as we do. Do you forget God's authority to command even hard

things, His convicting presence everywhere you, and that He is the God of other people as well?

There is much more to learn from this great book, but let us take these lessons to heart. Jonah is a mirror of our own graceless and self-centred hearts, the book of Jonah is given to teach us about God's compassionate grace and love for others.