

God's Severe Pursuit

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[0 : 00] Well, these days there's a tendency to underestimate God and overestimate ourselves, especially in the secular West as we live, where God is viewed as being irrelevant to our lives, if he's even there at all.

And so God is underestimated, and yet we overestimate ourselves, as is seen by the expressive individualism of our culture. What is expressive individualism? Well, it's probably best summed up in slogans like, you be you, or be true to yourself, follow your heart, find yourself, all expressing the need to be who you want to be.

It's having freedom to express your identity, no matter what anyone else says, you just choose for yourself who you would like to be. It's actually the message I've discovered of every single Disney movie.

Be yourself, just take Frozen, for example, one of the most recent ones. Remember Elsa, her song, Let It Go, Let It Go, Let It Go. I'm not going to sing it, so don't worry.

But you know the words, let it go, let it go, we're going to hold it back anymore. Let it go, let it go, turn away and slam the door. Then later on in the song, she sings, it's time to see what I can do to test the limits and break through.

[1 : 23] No right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free. But if that's not your thing, if that's too culturally dodgy, then what about the sound of music?

Remember the nun? The song, what was it? Climb every mountain. Climb every mountain, forward every stream, follow every rainbow till you find your dream.

You get the point. We overestimate ourselves and what we can do, believing we've got the power to do whatever we want to do and the power to be whoever we want to be.

But what we see in Jonah chapter 1 is the danger in both of these things, both in underestimating God and overestimating ourselves. Because the story of Jonah shows us what God is like and therefore we see what we are like.

And if we misunderstand God and ourselves, then life will be confusing at best and life will crush us at worst. So let's look at Jonah 1 today under two headings, well three actually, bonus.

[2 : 29] So first point, don't underestimate God. Don't overestimate yourself. And then thirdly, what's the answer? So first, don't overestimate God. Second, don't underestimate yourself.

And third, what's the answer? So first, don't underestimate God. Last time, if you were here or in verses 1 to 3, we saw God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh.

It was part of God's mission plan to save people from judgment and then offer to them his salvation. And yet Jonah disobeyed. And so here we pick up the story and Jonah is on the run.

But God hasn't finished with him yet. So we probably know how the story goes. You can ask a child and they'll probably tell you the story of Jonah. Jonah gets on the ship, storm comes, Jonah's thrown into the sea, and then a huge fish swallows him up and he's rescued.

That's a basic plot, isn't it, of what's going on here. But the story's not just about Jonah and your great fish. Last week we saw the story is about a great God.

[3 : 35] And he's a God that we should never underestimate. That's what this passage is saying to us. Because here we see his power. So let's never underestimate his power. But here we also see his mercy.

Let's never underestimate his mercy. So verse 4. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

The original here says that God threw or God hurled. Just think of the image of maybe a baseball player with a baseball pitching, throwing it, taking aim and throwing it right down the baseball field.

So God here is throwing a wind, fierce storm onto the sea and he's directing it right at Jonah. Because of Jonah's disobedience and so there's consequences for Jonah's sin. And there are always consequences for our sin. And yet what God is doing is he's using his mighty power so that he might show mercy to Jonah. And that's what happens.
[4 : 43] Mercy for Jonah. Mercy for the sailors. Mercy for the Ninevites. And ultimately, through the Lord Jesus Christ, mercy for us. This is where this whole story is heading.

But Jonah had no clue what God was doing. And he didn't really care either. Because as the storm was raging, where was Jonah? Well, he was down deep by the bottom of the ship and he was sleeping. And so God's power wasn't just working on the great, the big, like this storm that he threw. But God's power was working in the small. Just look at verse 7. Then the sailors said to each other, come, let's cast lots to find out who's responsible for this calamity. They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

So while the severity of this storm is being emphasised, the Lord uses the casting of lots by these superstitious sailors to pinpoint Jonah as the one who's to blame for the storm. Proverbs 16.33 says, the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. And so here we see Jonah being interrogated. Verse 8.

[5 : 50] So they asked him, tell us who's responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you? He answered, I'm a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

So Hebrew would have been a designation that people would have used of Israelites. So foreigners would have referred to them as Hebrews. But it's interesting how Jonah identifies himself ethnically first and then religiously.

Did you see that? It seems as if he regards his race as being more fundamental to his identity than his faith. But we'll come back to this later.

But what Jonah does here is he clearly confesses his faith by saying, I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. So Jonah knows who God is, which must make his behavior seem absolutely crazy and ridiculous to all of these sailors who are sailing with him. How could he confess to worship the Lord, who is God of heaven, and yet run away from him, thinking he can hide?

[7 : 05] Verse 10. So this terrifies everybody else. This terrified them. And they asked, what have you done? Jonah told them he'd already said he'd been running from the Lord.

And so Jonah is a total hypocrite here. Jonah is a total hypocrite. He's what we might call a functional atheist. He knows God. He believes in God.

But he lives his life as if he didn't. Jonah had seriously underestimated the power of God. But also he had underestimated his mercy.

Because the storm ends when Jonah is thrown into the sea and God provides a fish to rescue him. So none of this was pleasant for Jonah. None of this was pleasant for the sailors.

But this was the Lord's severe mercy in pursuing Jonah in order to save him, that he might save other people. It reminded me, in fact, of a book with the same title, A Severe Mercy.

[8 : 05] I don't normally buy books with that kind of cover, but it says Shona C. Thompson, so it's her book. It's a great book, A Severe Mercy. It's a book by an author called Sheldon Van Auken.

And it's an autobiographical account of how Sheldon Van Auken and his wife met and they married. It speaks of his friendship with C.S. Lewis.

And it tells of his relationship with God. And in the book, C.S. Lewis speaks of the death of Sheldon Van Auken's wife as being a severe mercy.

He calls it a severe mercy. What does he mean? Well, Van Auken or Van and his wife, Jean Davis or Davie, they met and fell in love as two 19-year-olds, college students just before World War I. And they decided that their love for one another would come before all other things and all other people. And he spoke of it being the shining barrier.

[9 : 09] In other words, they wanted it to be like a shield that protected them from any other intruders coming in and influencing their love for one another. And at this point, when they were young, they considered themselves agnostics.

But then they left the United States and they traveled to Oxford where they met C.S. Lewis and other academics. And then Christianity began to seem reasonable to them and make sense to them

because of the people that they met.

But then they went back to settle in the USA and Van Auken saw that Davie, his wife, was more committed to God than he was.

And so it had consequences for their relationship. And he says, though I wouldn't have admitted it, even to myself, I didn't want God aboard.

And around this time, Davie was diagnosed with a severe illness and she died quickly afterwards.

And so the rest of Van Auken's book is, it's really the focus on his journey of grief and how he wrestles with the God who he believes took his wife from him.

[10:22] And the wrestling in the book is recorded in a series of letters between Van Auken and C.S. Lewis. And these letters go back and forth. And so Lewis was really writing as a friend, writing to comfort him.

But C.S. Lewis, if you read the book and I'd recommend it, he writes with a piercing insight.

Because he thought that Van Auken's problem was that he'd made an idol of love.

And this idol of love was killing his faith in God. And Lewis said that something would have to die.

Either the idol would have to die or the faith would have to die.

And the worst option, according to Lewis, was that the faith die while he and his wife carry on living.

And that's why Lewis says you've been treated with a severe mercy when his wife died.

Because Lewis helped Van Auken see how the loss of Davy, his wife, really had freed him up to then explore and pursue his own faith in God.

[11:27] That's why he called it a severe mercy. Because his attachment to his wife had stopped him fully giving himself to God in love. And of course, we're not trying to ignore here the reality of pain or suffering in life.

But the story of Jonah, the story of this man and his wife, it reminds us that God may sometimes treat us with a severe mercy just like he did with Jonah.

God may work in that way in our lives. Not because he doesn't love us, but because he does love us. And he doesn't want us wandering far away from him.

He wants to bring us back. And others go on our own destructive path, just like Jonah was doing.

And so that's why we must never underestimate God's power, what he can do.

Or underestimate his mercy, the lengths that he will go to, to pull us back. Because he is sovereign, he's loving, he's powerful, he's merciful.

[12:31] And he directs our lives. Sometimes in big ways, great big storm for Jonah. Sometimes in small ways, casting of lots to pinpoint Jonah as the guilty one.

But God knows what he's doing. And as a Christian, those who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ and who know God, as a Christian, this is really the only comfort in life that we can have.

Because you see, the nihilist doesn't see any meaning in severity. It's all just pointless. Everything is pointless. Insignificantly. And yet the fatalist doesn't have any hope for mercy.

How can this thing make sense? Or how can there be anything good that comes from this? The fatalist just sings along with Doris Day, where Elias just died a couple of weeks ago.

Que sera, sera. Whatever will be, will be. But our God, as Christian believers, our God gives meaning that suffering can't take away. Gives satisfaction that's not based on circumstances.

[13:36] And gives a hope that even in the face of death and all the evil in the world can't be taken away. And so surely it's better to run to this God instead of running away from him like Jonah was trying to do.

And surely it's better to trust that this God has our life and our circumstances in the loving hollow of his hand. So let's not underestimate God.

Jonah doesn't want us to do that, the book of Jonah. Second point. Don't overestimate yourself.

Don't overestimate yourself. And we see this in the fear of the sailors and the faith of Jonah.

So the sailors, first of all, this whole scene from verse 4 through to 17, which is the second scene in the book, if you like. The whole scene is marked by the fear of the sailors.

So look down. It begins with fear in verse 5. And then it ends with fear in verse 16. And then it's got fear in the middle in verse 10.

[14:39] So the point is they were scared. They were afraid. So verse 5. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own God. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

So now these sailors were used to life on the sea. And these were days when health and safety procedures and rules did not apply. Because ships would get caught in storms.

That was no surprise if you were a sailor. And yet this storm shows up the sailors for what they are really like. So they might have thought that they were strong.

And yet here they are at their wits end crying out to false gods to help them. And isn't that what happens in life?

In spite of how strong or stable or sorted or self-sufficient that we believe ourselves to be. And in spite of what we like to present to the world about having it all together.

[15:42] Whether on Facebook or on Instagram. Showing everybody how we've built up this great life for ourselves. With our pictures and our stories and so on. All our successes. Nobody ever puts a picture on Facebook of a cake that's failed.

Or an argument in the family. It's all the nice stuff. Because that's to present a kind of identity that we want the world to see. But it's when suffering. It's when storms.

It's when troubles. It's when difficulties. When these things come upon us. Then that shows us up for what we really are like. That's when our identity.

Our true identity. Is revealed to everybody else. Our weaknesses can be airbrushed. And so our fears are just exposed. So storms will force us to see that we had too high of an estimation of ourselves.

We thought we were stronger than we really were. We thought we had more confidence than we really did. And that's what's happening here. And so do you see the sailors?

[16:46] And their answer to this revelation that they weren't the men they thought they were. Their answer is to get religious. Which is odd, isn't it?

That's what people do. When the storms of life come, let's get religious. Try religion. Maybe that'll help. Because they know, as well as we do, that in times of crisis, we don't have the resources to cope within ourselves.

Despite what the self-esteem movement would tell us, inside ourselves we know we can't really do it on our own. We're aware that we need a greater power from the outside to help us.

And that's why people will often turn to God when all other avenues in life have been exhausted.

Extreme situations in life remind us that we need God, even if we don't like to admit it.

It's often said that when the plane is going down, there are no atheists. In other words, in times of extreme fear, we all want God to do something to help.

[17:55] Even in less extreme situations, sometimes the words from people's lips are, Oh God, or please God, they just slip out. Because deep down inside there's this yearning that we can't do it, we can't fix it.

But God can. Why? Well, we realise that we're afraid. We're inadequate. And we need God.

When there's nothing we can do, the human instinct, which God has built within us, is to cry out to him for help. And even, not just individuals, but even a secular culture like ours, there is this unconscious seeking God's help when tragedy strikes.

That's why we get this hashtag pray movement on social media. Hashtag pray for London. Hashtag pray for Manchester. Why? Well, when the storms come, this suppressed conviction that there is a God, and we need him, just bubbles up and rises to the surface.

And so as we apply this, well, we should be aware of the danger of overestimating ourselves, shouldn't we? It's easy to feel confident. It's easy to feel secure when our primary identity is in something other than God in this life.

[19:18] It may be our success. It may be our career. It may be our wealth, our home, our family, or whatever it is. Whatever we look to for significance in the world will be the thing that we look to for our security.

And it's great when life is plain sailing and everything is going well. But when the storms come, the things we look to for our security can fail us.

And they let us down. And the sailors learned this, didn't they? And we may need to learn it too.

Especially learn it before the storms come so that we're prepared.

So the sailors are characterized by fear. That's them. But Jonah is oblivious to the danger because he's running away from God.

So let's just think about Jonah here. While everybody else is praying to gods that don't exist, Jonah can't even open his lips and pray to the God who does exist.

[20:17] And so he's challenged by the captain. Verse 6. The captain went to him and said, How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God. Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not

perish.

God uses this unbelieving captain, this pagan, to wake Jonah up. Not just physically but also spiritually. And the words that the captain uses actually echo the words that the Lord speaks at the beginning of Jonah in chapter 1, verse 1 and 2.

So verse 1 and 2 basically says, The word of the Lord came to Jonah and said, Arise, call out. Then here in verse 6, the captain comes and says to Jonah, Arise.

Let's call out. So God sends this captain with words that remind Jonah of his calling.

And rebuke Jonah because he's fleeing from that calling. And remind him of how careless he's being. Because Jonah didn't care, did he? We saw last week about the plight of the Ninevites.

[21 : 17] And here Jonah doesn't care about the plight of the sailors. And yet the captain wakes Jonah up to the danger that they're all in and the need for help. And the captain's saying that these false gods are useless.

They don't work. The idols have failed us. And so he's saying, Jonah, Jonah, what about you? Do you have a God that you can call on? Will he be able to help us? He's desperate for help from the God that Jonah has turned away from.

It's interesting. The captain was even more prepared to cry out to God than Jonah was. And that's a shameful indictment on Jonah's faith, isn't it?

It took God to send this pagan to point his prophet back to him. Jonah reveals in his attitude and in his actions that in his heart, he's a stranger to the compassion and mercy of God.

[22 : 24] But one commentator in the book of Jonah is a man called Hugh Martin, a 19th century Scottish minister. And in his commentary on Jonah, he preached a sermon back in the day.

And he gave it this title on this verse, verse 6. And the title was The World Rebuking the Church. The World Rebuking the Church. And we hear what he's saying, don't we? Because it's right for Christians and it's right for churches to be rebuked by the world for their failure to be proper Christians and proper churches.

Professing to be a Christian means nothing. Calling yourself a church means nothing if it's not backed up by Christian belief and behaviour.

Society has every right to call Christian people out for their inconsistency and their hypocrisy.

Because when our identity, which should be in Christ, makes no difference to our public life, how we are out there in the world, then there's a problem.

Because Jonah's private faith did no public good here. And that should never be the case with anyone who professes to worship God. So two points.

[23 : 48] Don't underestimate God. Don't overestimate yourself. And thirdly then, well, what's the answer? What's the answer? The answer is to fear God. So here in the story, Jonah proposes the only solution to make the sea calm down.

Verse 12. Take me up and throw me into the sea, he replied, and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.

He admits blame. He accepts responsibility. And he volunteers to die. If the sailors are going to survive, Jonah says, my life must be sacrificed.

And yet they don't want to kill him. And yet they realise there's no other way to be saved. Verse 13. Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

Then they cried out to the Lord, please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man. For you, Lord, have done as we please. And they took Jonah and threw him overboard.

[24 : 52] And the raging sea grew calm. The sailors realised that they could not underestimate God. He is the living God who was in control of the whole situation.

And so they cry out to him, conscious of the gravity of throwing Jonah overboard. And yet aware that he is the Lord and he has every right to act in any way he wants to act and do what he wants to do.

And so now they're praying to the real God. So even before the sea grows calm, they were reaching out to God for who he is, not just for what he could give them. And so their fear in the beginning, verse 5, which heightened in the storm, verse 10 and 11.

Now, there's a different kind of fear when the storm is calmed down. In verse 16. So they moved from fearing the storm to fearing the Lord.

It's a different kind of fear. It doesn't mean in verse 16 that they were frightened, but that they were filled with awe. They were filled with wonder. And they began to revere the Lord, the God of heaven.

[26 : 09] They just witnessed the Lord's power in sending the raging storm and then stopping it in an instant. And so offering sacrifice and making vows was a sign that they were converted to the Lord.

God saved them through Jonah's simple confession and then Jonah's sacrifice. But Jonah didn't know that God would save them and they didn't know that God would save Jonah.

And yet the Lord's salvation was reaching out to the nations as Jonah was sinking deep into the sea. A commentator says this, Jonah's anti-missionary activity has ironically resulted in the conversion of non-Israelites.

And now here's Jonah sinking. And he's in need of the very mercy of God that he was so reluctant. To give to the Ninevites.

And yet God shows it to him. In God's severe mercy, he sends this fish, maybe a whale, don't know, a huge fish, to swallow Jonah up.

[27 : 22] And that's how the Lord does his saving work. He saves us by his grace. When we are helpless to do anything to save ourselves.

And that's why we should never underestimate God or overestimate ourselves. Instead, we should fear God and stand in awe of his power because it's so great.

And stand in awe of his mercy because it's so wonderful. Because the God who saved Jonah is the God who can even take our rebellion against him and turn it around and make it work for him.

So as we close, it's foolish, isn't it? To try and create an identity for ourselves apart from God. When the right thing to do is to submit to God and to find our true identity in Christ as one of God's people. Seeking an identity in life in anything other will only wreak havoc for us. But this compassionate God pursues us to show us mercy.

[28 : 34] And he'll even show us severe mercy if we need it. Because he loves us so much.

Because just as the Lord saved the sailors through the sacrifice of his prophet Jonah, so he will save us through the sacrificial death of his son, Jesus Christ.

When Jesus was on earth, he was asked for a sign. And he said, none would be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah. And then he said, for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Of course, there's enormous differences between Jonah and Jesus. Jesus called himself greater than Jonah. So there's going to be.

Jonah only came near to death for his sins. But Jesus died for our sins. So Jonah was punished for his disobedience.

Yet Jesus took the punishment for our disobedience. And so we can say that Jesus Christ faced the ultimate storm for us.

[29 : 50] Because while Jonah sunk down into the sea, Jesus went under the storm of God's wrath on the cross. By dying in our place, Jesus took what we deserve so that we need never face it in hell.

Because that's the only storm that we really need to fear. Because it's the only one that can wipe us out and sink us forever. And yet Jesus went through that storm to save us and to give us calm and peace forever.

And it was a severe mercy. Severe because Jesus Christ took our sin, was separated from his Father for the first time in all eternity.

So that God's mercy might fall upon us. And so it's only when we repent of our sin, turn away from it, and believe in Jesus Christ that we can be saved.

That is our only hope. The God of Jonah, the God of the Lord Jesus Christ, can be our God. The God who saves and rescues.

[31 : 00] And that's why we should never underestimate this God. And why we should never overestimate ourselves. But we should fear God. And rest secure with an identity in Christ.

Because Jesus will never leave you when you fear in life. And Jesus will always forgive you when you fail. Yeah. Let them be in Christ. We can't live through you when he gets lost and George.

And we can't believe that. Let them be ificar. And just refer with an authority in Christ. Because witness can win. And that they cannot fulfill you when you fail. And that's pani- ■■■■■. And that's

right. A wall-Ó Ó demonstration. And that's right. And that's right.
And they know that you can change those competencies, and that's right. And that's right. And so
bad. And that's right. And now I'm thinking that's right.