

God's Great Purpose

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[0 : 00] Today we begin a new series looking at Jonah. In 2017, the website cut.com asked a bunch of children to describe God to an illustrator.

And then the illustrator, called Koji, would translate their ideas into a work of art. And it was all recorded on video, and the video began with the illustrator asking the question, What do you imagine God might look like?

What do you imagine God might look like? He wanted the children to give their own ideas about God, which would then be transformed into a drawing that he made up.

But what they came up with, of course, was complete and utter nonsense. And it's always going to be because their idea of God came from their imaginations. It was pure imagination, pure conjecture.

And yet it isn't just children who like to think what God is like. Many people like to dream up or imagine God to be like this.

[1 : 06] Not like that, but like this. That he acts and behaves in this way, but not in that way. And most people do it, whether they believe in God or not.

And yet the problem is that we can get God wrong if he is the God of our imaginations. And it's a serious mistake to get God wrong. And so today as we look at the prophet Jonah, the book in the Bible, we get a real picture, a true picture of what God is like.

Because this isn't just a story about Jonah and the whale. Some actually find the huge fish hard to swallow anyway. In fact, you could say that the fish is really just a red herring.

And they're in the jokes for the day. So this is not a story about a great big fish. This is a story about a great big God. He is the main character in this book.

He is the Lord, the gracious, the compassionate, the loving and merciful God. The God who has a great purpose. Not just a great purpose for Jonah or for the Ninevites, but a great purpose for the world.

[2 : 18] And that includes you and me. Because the central message of Jonah is right there in the heart of the book in chapter 2, verse 9. So just look at chapter 2, verse 9.

It says, salvation comes from the Lord. Salvation comes from the Lord. In fact, that phrase, salvation comes from the Lord, is really the plot line that runs right the way through the Bible from beginning to end.

If you're going to sum up the message of the Bible, it is that salvation comes from the Lord. And in Jonah, we see that salvation comes from the Lord in this pop-up picture book kind of style.

Because the real evangelist is the Lord. And Jonah is more like the reluctant evangelist. And God wants to reach a pagan city, Nineveh, with his salvation.

And so he sends Jonah on a mission with his message. And while the book of Jonah might seem very simple, simple story, it is actually a literary masterpiece.

[3 : 24] There are four chapters, and they're carefully crafted into two halves. It's a game of two halves, like rugby or football. And these two halves are very similar, almost running in parallel.

So chapters 1 and 2 record God's command to Jonah, which Jonah disobeys. And then chapters 3 and 4 record God's command again to Jonah.

And this time, Jonah obeys. And so these two halves are parallel, as they record essentially God's judgment, followed by his salvation.

And so as we read this book, we can't fail to see what God is like. Because Jonah, you see, like many people today, would want a God of their own making.

That is, a God who behaves in the way that they think he should. But the real God, as Jonah discovers, is a bit of an enigma. Because he is both just and he's merciful.

[4 : 27] He hates evil and he must punish. And yet he is compassionate and he loves to save. And so we're, in a sense, on a voyage of discovery as we look at Jonah.

Because we see what God is like. And in seeing what God is like, we then discover what we should be like. Whether we call ourselves a Christian or not. Because God is angry at our sin.

But he is full of compassion towards us. And that's a great thing. That's why the character and the purposes of God are revealed in Jonah.

But they're ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And so we need to get the message of Jonah to get with the mission of God. And so today we're going to look at the opening scene of Jonah in verse 1 to verse 3.

And we see two things. We see the real evangelist, who is the Lord, verse 1 and 2. And then the reluctant evangelist. And that's Jonah in verse 3.

[5 : 28] So the real evangelist and then the reluctant evangelist. So first, the real evangelist is the Lord. The Lord is the first character that we're introduced to. The word of the Lord came to Jonah.

So the Lord, written in capitals in our Bible, shows us that this is the sacred name of God. It asserts his absolute power to be and to do whatever he chooses.

And so it's the Lord's initiative that starts off the story of Jonah. Jonah, the word of the Lord, is commanded to Jonah. And this phrase, the word of the Lord, comes up over a hundred times in the Old Testament.

And it describes God's authority as he sends out his prophets to proclaim his message. So the Lord, and then next we're introduced to Jonah.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Jonah's name means dove in Hebrew. And we don't get much of an introduction, which probably means Jonah didn't really need one.

[6 : 33] Because there's another reference to Jonah in the Old Testament. One more reference. In 2 Kings chapter 14 and verse 25, there's reference to a prophet of the same name.

And this prophet, Jonah, son of Amittai, prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, king in the 8th century BC. And so 2 Kings 14.25, and speaking of Jeroboam II, says this.

He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebohamath to the Dead Sea, 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.

And so the Lord used Jonah to prophesy that his people would get more land. But here, the Lord called Jonah to a different sphere of service.

He was to prophesy to the enemies of God's people. But Jonah also gets a mention in the New Testament by Jesus in Matthew chapter 12 and Luke chapter 11.

[7 : 43] Jesus compared and contrasted his own ministry with that of Jonah, saying something greater than Jonah is here. That's why Jonah isn't a made-up story.

Jesus confirms Jonah as a historical character. So this is history. So there's the Lord, there's Jonah. Now we come to the Ninevites, thirdly. Verse 2.

Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. So the Lord told Jonah to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh.

It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, situated on the eastern bank of the river Tigris. And today its ruins lie opposite the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, which we've heard of.

And so we get the Lord's description of Nineveh. Two words describe it, great and wicked. First of all, great. So Nineveh was great in terms of the number of people.

[8 : 45] By ancient standards, it was a major city with a population of 120,000, as chapter 4 tells us in verse 11. But there's more to Nineveh being great, because the people, we read chapter 4, 11, couldn't tell their right hand from their left.

In other words, they couldn't tell between right and wrong. They were spiritually clueless, they were far from God, and they were in need of salvation, of being saved.

And so the Lord, who's the great evangelist, the real evangelist, was concerned for them. And isn't that why we should be concerned for the thousands or the millions of people who live in our great cities?

I mean, just take Glasgow for an example. Glasgow is the biggest city in Scotland. It's the fourth largest city in the UK. In the 2011 census, Glasgow City had a population of nearly 600,000, with Greater Glasgow having a population of 1.2 million people.

Glasgow's got five universities, with 133,000 students from 135 countries. And yet recent research on churchgoing suggests that there are between 9,000 and 11,000 people who attend broadly evangelical churches in the city.

[10:16] So that would be 1.5 to 1.8 percent of the population attend a broadly evangelical church. And we've all probably been to the hydro, dying by the River Clyde.

We've maybe been to a concert. Taylor Swift, not me, maybe some of you, or Mumford and Sons or whoever. The capacity of the hydro is 13,000. And so you could fit all those who go to broadly evangelical churches in the city of Glasgow into the hydro and still have plenty seats left over.

And so Glasgow is a great city for many reasons. But it's a mission field because it's full of people who are spiritually clueless, far from God and in need of salvation.

And so cities matter, don't they? They matter because they contain so many lost people. And yet these are people who are so precious to God.

And that's why they need to hear the good news of salvation in a language that they can understand. So Nineveh is great. Nineveh is also described as being wicked.

[11:26] Its wickedness has come up before the Lord. So the later prophecy of Nahum in the Old Testament, 7th century BC, sums up the wickedness of Nineveh in a graphic way.

For Nineveh is the focus of God's wrath. And it's depicted as the embodiment of evil and cruelty. So in Nahum chapter 3, Nahum describes Nineveh in these terms.

It's a city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims, many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over corpses.

It was a brutal place. The Assyrian army knew how to kill and torture people. There are some horrific stories of what they did when they captured their enemies about burning adolescence and impaling people and sticking their heads on poles and all that kind of thing.

In fact, if you go to the British Museum in London, you'll see stone carvings which depict the cruelty of the Assyrians. So the Assyrian Empire was known as one of the most cruel and violent of ancient times.

[12:42] It could be called a terrorist state. And they were also responsible for the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, the Assyrians. And yet, the Lord wants Jonah to go to Nineveh.

And he told Jonah why. Because its wickedness had come up before him. So their evil and their wickedness was an offense against God.

Because the fact is, all of our sin, all the wrong things we do, are an offense against God. Whether it's wicked or evil actions, or cruel and hurtful speech, or hatred in our hearts, or filth in our minds. Everything comes up before God, however secret or hidden we imagine it to be. God doesn't miss any of what we say, think, or do.

And yet, modern people, those walking around on the streets outside, just don't like to think that God would take offense at any aspect of our lives.

[13:52] And people hate the very idea that we should be deserving of God's judgment. I guess a revealing and recent example of this has been the sacking of Israel Folau, the Australian rugby player, for a social media post.

And it caused huge offense. And there was an enormous public outcry. Because he dared, he dared to suggest that people go to hell.

And yet, the reality is that we all deserve hell. We all sin in all kinds of ways, and our sin is an offense against the holy God who made us. And that's why we deserve to be punished.

And yet, your average person just doesn't think we're that bad. Yes, we may have our flaws. Yes, we may have failed in many ways. But nobody, it seems, would ever think that God should judge us.

And yet, at the outset of Jonah, we're reminded that God does see what we do. And God is offended by the way that we live our lives against him.

[15:03] So, first, it sounds like God wants to condemn the people of Nineveh. After all, isn't that what they deserve? They deserve God's judgment for their wickedness and their evil and their cruelty.

And we probably don't complain or worry when people do get punished for the wrong things they've done. And yet, God's command to Jonah is a shocking one.

It's one that made little sense to Hebrew ears. Because Jonah going to a wicked people with God's message is the equivalent of being commanded to go to an Islamic state country, say somewhere

like Iran, going into Tehran, the capital, right in the city center, and telling people to repent of their sin and believe in Jesus.

The likelihood of a positive response is slim. The likelihood of being killed is very high. You see, it was unusual for a prophet to go to another nation.

Prophets would go to the people of Israel and they would pronounce judgment on other nations. But here is a prophet being told to go to another nation. And so the Lord, the real evangelist, views Nineveh as a mission field.

[16:27] Full of people who need to be saved. Because God's salvation is for all humanity. And that's why God promised Abraham, way back in Genesis chapter 12, that Abraham's descendants would be a blessing to all nations.

And so God is giving this pagan people the opportunity to experience his mercy. And that's what shocked Jonah. He even admits how shocked he was later.

If you look at chapter 4, verse 2, what he says, he prayed to the Lord. Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish.

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love. A God who relents from sending calamity.

So Jonah suspected that God would show mercy. And he didn't like that idea. He knew that while the wicked people of Nineveh provoked God's wrath, he also knew that they would arouse his grace and his compassion and his mercy.

[17:42] After all, the fact that God is sending a warning of judgment here means that God is giving them an opportunity to respond. And Jonah could see the Ninevites repenting.

And he could see that if they did repent, then God would forgive them of their sin. But Jonah didn't want God to be like this. That's not the kind of God he imagined he should have.

A God who forgives people who don't deserve it. So it was shocking for Jonah. And I wonder if it's shocking for us. Because it tells us that God can save any person.

And God wants all people to be saved. 1 Timothy chapter 2, verse 2 and 3 tells us that. Because that's the extravagant and the gracious and the compassionate and the merciful love that God has for sinful people.

And so it reminds us that we're not saved by the good life that we live or by the religious things that we've done. We're only saved by the sheer grace of God.

[18:56] Jonah chapter 2, verse 9. Salvation comes from the Lord. We can do anything to achieve our salvation. The Lord gives his salvation to us as a gift.

And it's a gift we don't deserve. And so that's the first point. He is the real evangelist, the Lord.

Secondly, more briefly, Jonah is the reluctant evangelist.

And we see this in verse 3. But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

So Jonah, three things. Jonah rejects God's word. Jonah runs from God's presence. And Jonah resents God's character. First, Jonah rejects God's word.

So the word of the Lord came to Jonah. And Jonah rejected it. And there's a connection in the original Hebrew between God's command and Jonah's response.

[20:01] So it reads more like, get up and go to Nineveh. And then later, and Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish. So God tells Jonah what his assignment is, but he deliberately disobeys God's direct command.

Jonah rejected God's word. And we need to make sure that we don't do the same. Because the word of the Lord comes to us in our Bibles.

That's how God speaks directly to us, telling us what to do. And so let's be careful that we don't reject God's word.

Either because we don't read our Bibles and let him speak to us. Or because we hear what he's saying, like Jonah, but we choose to disobey. First, he rejects God's word.

Second, he runs from God's presence. We see this twice. Verse three. Jonah tried to flee from God's presence by heading for Tarshish. Tarshish, it's thought, was in Spain.

[21:06] So Nineveh was in the east. But Jonah gets a ticket for about as far west as he could possibly go. And it sounds as though Jonah thought he could escape God's presence.

Like he could run away from God and God would be able to find him. But surely Jonah was aware that it's impossible to escape from God.

Later on in chapter one, verse nine, he acknowledges that the Lord is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. And Jonah was surely aware of the teaching of Psalm 139 of God's omnipresence.

God being ever present when we read these words. Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? And the answer, of course, is nowhere. You can't escape God.

You can run, but you can't hide from God. And so Jonah may have thought that running away from God was the solution. And yet running away from God was stupid.

[22 : 12] And so we need to be careful that we don't do the same. Because perhaps like Jonah, we know what God wants us to do, but we don't want to do it. And so we try and avoid God.

We try and avoid his presence. Stopping reading God's words. Stopping praying to him. We don't like maybe what he's called us to do. It's maybe too hard or too costly.

And so the easiest thing, it seems, is just to turn away from him. Or perhaps we think following God's ways is just going to spoil our fun.

And so we think, rather than be in God's presence and live his way, if we chase our dreams and seek joy and satisfaction and happiness in other places, then we'll be fine.

And yet that doesn't work, as Jonah discovered. So he rejects God's word. He runs from God's presence. And thirdly, Jonah resents God's character.

[23 : 10] He'd have thought that Jonah would be delighted to be part of God's mission plan, to go to a new city, to preach God's message, and to see people being saved.

But Jonah, it seems, doesn't care about the people of Nineveh. They're lost. But he doesn't really care very much about them.

So he didn't just have a problem with the job God gave him. He actually had a problem with God himself. Because Jonah resents God's character. You see, Jonah knew what God is like.

Chapter 4, verse 2, he says, I knew that you're a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love. A God who relents from sending calamity.

But the knowledge of God that Jonah clearly had in his head hadn't fully sunk deep enough down into his heart. Sinclair Ferguson, who's got a book on Jonah called Man Overboard, says, the pulse beat of God's heart has an evangelistic rhythm.

[24 : 22] I love that. The pulse beat of God's heart has an evangelistic rhythm. So Jonah needed to better grasp the pulse beat of God's heart so that it became the pulse beat of his own heart.

And I think, sadly, we might find Jonah's attitude towards the Ninevites in ourselves, if we look in the mirror and assess how we feel towards those who know nothing of God.

Sometimes I fear that I just don't care enough about those who are lost and in need of God's salvation. And so we can become reluctant evangelists like Jonah who need to better grasp the compassion that God, the real evangelist, has for everybody.

Because God's not just concerned about his people, which is sometimes what we think within the church. As long as the church is fine and God loves the people of the... But God is concerned for everybody.

So people of all nations, no matter how wicked or evil, no matter how hardened they are, how far away they seem, are people who matter to God.

[25 : 35] God's mercy may extend to anyone. And so do we, do you, do I, feel enough for those who are lost?

And do we care enough to tell them about God's salvation? Because they're all around us. They're in our streets, they're in our workplaces, they're on our courses, and they're in our families.

And we live in a pagan city, just like Nineveh, that needs to be evangelised. I was thinking about it this week. Sometimes we speak about Christendom or being a Christian country.

Actually, we're a post-Christian country. Even, I would say, we're verging on being a pre-Christian country. Because so many people are clueless when it comes to Christianity.

And so what's going to make us get up like God commanded Jonah and get on with the work that God has called us to do? Well, we don't just need to know what the real evangelist is like in our heads.

[26 : 41] Because we can know what he's like. We can read what he's like. But we need to become more like him. As his great purposes for this world melt our hearts.

Because in Jesus Christ, God extends his mercy and offers his salvation to us, even though we don't deserve it. That's why Jesus spoke about the sign of the prophet Jonah.

He says, 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.

So the sign of Jonah is the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that is the very centre and heart of God's purposes. So the compassionate God came to seek us and to save us.

Because we are lost. And so while Jonah reluctantly and eventually went with God's offer of salvation to Nineveh, Jesus Christ willingly came into our world to give up his life on a cross for our salvation.

[27 : 52] And so it's only as we remember that we are a sinner, saved by what Jesus Christ has done, that we'll overcome our reluctance in evangelism.

And so as Christians, we must go to other people because Jesus Christ has come to us. We go because Jesus has come. But if you're here and you're not a Christian or sure what you believe, then go first to Jesus.

God sees your sin. And while you may try and run, you can't hide from God. And so there's no point trying. Go to the compassionate God who is just and merciful.

He must punish your sin. But he sent Jesus to be punished in our place so that we need never face his punishment. Salvation comes from the Lord.

He offers it. And so we must freely receive it.