

Jonah 1 – A Passionate God

Jonah 1

The book of Jonah is arguably the best known book of the Old Testament. Jonah, son of Amittai is called by God to go to Nineveh and preach against it. The people of Nineveh are in a bad way and God cannot ignore it any longer. But Nineveh was the last place on earth Jonah wanted to go. So, ignoring God's call, he sets off for Tarshish instead. He boards a boat at Joppa and, while he's asleep below deck, God sends a great storm, so violent that it threatened to break the ship into pieces. The crew discover that this is all Jonah's doing and, once they throw him overboard, the raging sea grows calm.

But, despite the sailors' fears, it's not the end of the story for Jonah. God sends a big fish to swallow him, and Jonah was inside the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, after which he's vomited onto dry land. God speaks to Jonah a second time: *'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.'* This time he obeys and, on hearing the message that God intends to overturn Nineveh in forty days, they repent and turn from their evil ways. But Jonah hasn't quite finished his complaining, necessitating a final lesson from God about compassion from under a tree.

That's the story in a nutshell and one that you'll have heard many times before, most likely in your childhood. But, whilst it's probably the best known book in the Old Testament, immortalised in children's books and catchy songs, it's also the least understood. People see the great fish and fail to see the great God, for neither Jonah nor the fish are the star of this story, but God. A passionate God, concerned for a people he created, but who do not yet know him. A people who deserved judgement and punishment, but who received kindness and compassion. Let's have a look at chapter one in more detail.

The chapter begins with word coming to Jonah from God. *'Go'*, he is told, *'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'* But this very idea sends Jonah in the opposite direction. Tarshish is likely on the west coast of the Mediterranean in what is now modern-day Spain. Jonah is in Israel, in Galilee. Now if I had a map and showed you all three of these places, something would strike you. You would see Nineveh on the right, to the east; Tarshish on the left, to the west; with Israel - right in the middle. What does this mean? Jonah, when called to go to Nineveh, does everything he can to do the *exact opposite*. God calls him to go

east and he deliberately goes west. As *The Jesus Storybook Bible* puts it, Jonah strolls up to the docks in Joppa, the nearest seaport, and says, *'One ticket for not-Nineveh, please!'*

Why does Jonah disobey? There are possibly two key reasons. The first is *fear*. Jewish writer Hayyim Lewis said this about Nineveh and Assyria, the place God told Jonah to go and preach:

'The Assyrians were the Nazi storm-troopers of the ancient world. They were the pitiless power-crazed foe. They showed no quarter in battle, uprooting entire peoples in their fury for conquest. They extinguished the Northern Kingdom of Israel... For Jonah, Nineveh, then, was no ordinary city; it carried doom-laden, tragic memories, it stood as a symbol of evil incarnate.'

The second reason, and most likely the main one, is *hate*, but it's very connected to the first, fear. Jonah is afraid that the Ninevites will listen to God. We see this later in the book, at the start of chapter four when Jonah, in anger that the people repented, prays to God, *'O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish.'* Jonah looks down on these people. He hates the Assyrians. He's mad about their sin - just like God is. But unlike the Lord, he doesn't want to see them rescued. He wants them to pay. He wants them to get what's coming to them.

Jonah thinks they are beyond God's love. He is filled with hatred for them. They had harmed his people before; he knows they would again. That's why he doesn't want to go. That's why he gets so angry later when they repent. They're his enemies. You can see why he's reluctant to go. God is calling him to a people he was afraid of - for good reason, and who he passionately hates and wants to see get their comeuppance. He doesn't want to be a part of anything good happening to them. Sound reason for going in the opposite direction! And who could blame him?

But, as I said at the beginning, this is a story about God. A God who cares for, and is passionate about his people. No matter that Jonah doesn't recognise the Ninevites as God's people – they're gentiles after all, not part of the people of Israel. But God has seen Nineveh's wickedness and is concerned. And that's the first lesson we can learn from chapter one about God: *that he is entwined with his world*. This isn't a God watching from a distance, but from close up. We might think of God as being 'out there', a long way away but, in reality, he's right here among us. I wonder what image of God you have in your mind when you pray. Does it feel as if you're making a long-distance telephone call, or that

you're lobbing snowballs at the moon? But Jesus says something else, that God is *in* us through him, and through the Holy Spirit. And if he's *in* us, then he's involved in our lives, involved in the detail, involved even as the sailors cast lots to see who's responsible for the storm.

The second lesson we learn from this chapter is that God wants us to partner with him in his mission and gets frustrated when we say no. Jonah runs away from the Lord and wants nothing to do with either God or the mission. He openly rebels against God's sovereignty, the fact that God knows what he is doing. He goes to Tarshish via Joppa which I find really interesting, as this is where Peter, in Acts 10, receives his vision of a gentile banquet. And it's here that he realises that God doesn't show favouritism, but accepts men and women from every nation who fear him and do what is right. The message God sent to the people of Israel is actually for all. But Jonah is having none of it. God may well have decided to intervene in Nineveh – to gentiles - and to partner with his people to do so, but Jonah frustrates God's purposes by running away.

The third thing we learn about God is that he isn't afraid of pursuit. Hot pursuit at that. He sends a wind, a great wind. But Jonah is asleep. He's ignorant of all that is going on and is deep below deck. Unbeknown to him, he's about to go down even further! God pursues Jonah in love, not rage. He's deadly serious about the problem in Nineveh and determined to do something about it. So he whispers at Jonah through the storm, through the sailors. It's ironic that Jonah is the Hebrew, the man of God, but it's the sailors, the outsiders, who tell him how to respond. This leads us to the fourth thing we can learn about God.

God calls us to identify with him and take responsibility. The sailors ask Jonah five questions: Who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? And, from what people are you? And suddenly Jonah is confronted with his responsibility. At last he says, '*I'm a Hebrew*', which is a term better understood by foreigners. It's the equivalent of us saying, '*I'm a Christian*'. He emerges from his hiding place and owns up to who he is, and who's to blame for the desperate situation they're all in.

Fifthly, and finally, we see a God ready to show mercy, though it doesn't appear that merciful when the sailors throw Jonah overboard! Chapter one begins with a portrait of God in charge, and it *ends* with God in charge. We

read that *'The Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah.'* The mission is still on. There's still time for Jonah to come to his senses and obey God's calling.

As we reflect on the story of Jonah for our lives today, I wonder if you ever try to run from God's word. I know I do. Where do we primarily hear God's word today? In the Bible? First of all, do you ever even hear it? Do you read it? But when you do, do you do what it says? Do you put it in practice? When others approach us, reminding us of what God has said, do we listen to them? Do we heed God's gracious self-revelation?

If you don't run from God's word, do you ever run from his calling? Maybe it's a vocation God has clearly equipped you for. Maybe it's some kind of ministry, some event, some task, that you sense God pushing you toward, and you're refusing to budge. Maybe it's a difficult conversation you're refusing to have. Maybe it's an open door for the gospel you just won't walk through. Are you missing the opportunity to see God work powerfully in and through you?

Some things to think about as you go through this next week. But, at the end of chapter one, we give thanks for a God, a passionate God who sees, hears and is passionate about Nineveh and those who not yet know him, about Jonah, and about us. Who aches to partner with us. Who calls us not to run away but to join him in fulfilling his purpose. How is God calling you this week?