

Sunday, 6 August 2023

Jonah Chapter 1

Salvation through Judgement and Mercy

Introduction

Eliza really enjoys her stories and singing before bed. There are lots of famous Bible Stories that we read, Daniel and the Lion's Den, Noah's Ark, Moses and the Exodus, etc.

Well, one of the books that Eliza particularly likes at the moment is, Jonah and the Very Big Fish.

The book starts by saying 'Jonah was very Grumpy'. If you've read the book of Jonah, I wonder what your view of Jonah is? Do we just see him as a grumpy or angry prophet? - I think that is probably the classic position, isn't it? Often sermons on Jonah are labelled the angry prophet or the reluctant man of God. And although not untrue, just maybe we need to understand a little more about him and his background to see why he acts in the way he does.

In home group a couple of weeks ago we were discussing something from history and someone in the group mentioned we need to be careful to only judge people within their context. Roy said the same of Abraham recently in sermons. We must try our best to see Biblical Characters in their time and context.

Context of Jonah

So over the next four weeks, we are going to work through the book of Jonah together and as we start that I think it would be very helpful to build some context and historical background to Jonah.

In the Old Testament, we first hear about Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25. It says '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.'

So Jonah was born around 800 B.C. and prophesied to God's people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel between 780 to 722 B.C. when Israel was attacked and exiled by Assyria. He was from Gath-Hepher which is an insignificant village, near Nazareth in the region of Galilee. His work happened, roughly the same time, as Amos and Hosea.

The map on the left shows the growth in the border of Israel, from the red line to the blue line, during the reign of Jeroboam the 2nd, which Jonah prophesied about. The pink star shows us where Joppa is and the black star shows us Gath-Hepher. All this shows Jonah was an experienced prophet, he'd been around the block a few times.

The map on the left shows the Assyrian super-power nation. The red star is where the great city of Nineveh is. The red box is the small map that is covered on the 1st map.

Jonah himself is in emotional turmoil because of two things, firstly the threat and attacks on Israel from Assyria. Then secondly, potentially even more importantly, is the fact that God's own people, Israel, aren't responding to his word from any of the prophets and continue to live in sin.

As with all humans, Jonah isn't a man with only one emotion. Jonah is Angry in his book but it's potentially unfair to label him as just angry, grumpy or petulant.

I'd love to tell you about how the Prophet Elisha responded in a relatable situation to Jonah. Remember both Elisha and Jonah had similar roles, to be prophets to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. To share God's word with his people.

In 2 Kings 8:7-15. King Ben-Hadad of Aram was ill and sent his court official Hazael to speak to Elisha, to see whether he would recover. Elisha eventually says the King will die and pronounces that Hazael will become King. Verse 11 ends with 'The man of God began to weep'. Why did Elisha weep? He goes on to say to Hazael. Because I know the harm you will do to the Israelites," he answered. "You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men with the sword, dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women."

Elisha's work of pronouncing God's word cut him to the core. It was a bitter duty to discharge the news that Elisha's own people, the Israelites, would suffer at the hands of Hazael, who he was pronouncing king.

This is similar to Jonah. Jonah knows that the Assyrians, of which Nineveh is a major city, will be God's chosen instrument to bring curses and destruction on the people of Israel if they don't repent. The difference between the two prophets is that Elisha is obedient when it hurt, whereas Jonah is disobedient, instead driven by his own emotions.

Elisha and Jonah are both anguished over their roles to share God's word. The definition of Anguished is 'experiencing or expressing severe mental or physical pain or suffering.' Was Elisha just a sad prophet that wept and was Jonah just an angry prophet? Surely not, people react in different ways over similar injustices.

Jonah's anger flows out of the anguish he feels in light of everything that is happening around him. The threat of the Assyrians, the lack of response from God's own people and then on top of that. The call of God to go to those enemies and bring them the Good News that Jonah felt was reserved for Israel.

As I was talking about Jonah with a friend recently and he used this analogy. Imagine a Pastor who has been preaching to his congregation for years and years. Faithfully teaching God's word but the Church has just become numb to what he is saying. His sermons are full of life and display God's word but still no response. One day the Pastor preaches at an evangelist event. He goes there and after one sermon, the whole room responds to the Word of God. How should that

Pastor feel? Joy at the fact that people have responded to God's word but also he is likely to feel a sense of pain because his own flock aren't responding to the Word of God.

To some extent that is the emotional unrest that Jonah is struggling with. Jonah was wrong in many ways in the Book of Jonah. He is disobedient, angry and sinful. We shouldn't excuse that behaviour but it's helpful to know the background, context and time in which he lived. And hold that in tension as we read through and reflect on Jonah's story together.

Tell the Story

The story of Chapter 1 is an incredible historical narrative that is full of disobedience, God's hand at work and a changing of fortunes. It starts with Jonah being asked by God to go to Nineveh and preach to them, telling them of their wickedness and offering a glimmer of repentance and hope. Instead, he runs away to Joppa, a port on the coast of the Mediterranean to get on a boat to head to Tarshish in southern modern-day Spain. As he starts sailing away God raise a big storm to stop Jonah's disobedience. Whilst Jonah is sleeping, the sailors on the boat do all they can to get the boat back to land by throwing cargo overboard. Eventually casting lots to see who is responsible for this storm. The lot falls on Jonah. Once again the sailors, with compassion, try to get back to land on their own strength, instead of throwing Jonah overboard. But eventually, they accept God's call and cast Jonah into the depth below. This calms the sea and brings the sailors to repent before God. And then most famously of all Chapter 1 ends with God providing a big fish to swallow Jonah, ultimately saving his life.

Teaching Points

1. Listen to God, not our emotions

Verse 1-3 says, *"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." 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."*

My first point is to **Listen to God, not our emotions**. Verses 1-3 set the scene for us in the book of Jonah. It starts with God's word and an introduction to whom this word has been delivered. What is this word then, firstly to 'GO'. God is saying to be active in what I have called you to do. It's a good question to ask ourselves, isn't it? Has God been calling you to do something, is there a little nudge in our lives to change something, maybe reconcile with someone or maybe a bigger calling that we need to explore and follow?

Well, what is Jonah's response to this call in verse 3? Run! Where? As far away as possible? Tarshish is in the south of modern-day Spain. It is the furthest place Jonah knows of and is the directly opposite direction from Ninevah.

But Jonah's aim isn't to get away from Ninevah, it's to escape God. It's almost like listening to a local radio station and as you drive away the signal starts to break up. That is what Jonah thinks will happen as he leaves the lands of Israel where God dwells. He is literally trying to escape God.

Psalm 139:7-10 says, Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

He can't escape God.

Jonah lets his emotions get the better of him. As we looked at context, Jonah is heartbroken that God's own people won't respond to his word. And that the Assyrians offer a great threat of destruction and suffering. And when we throw all of that together we see Jonah stewing in emotion. This influences his decision to go the other way from which God commanded him. He can't bare the thought of a Gentile nation responding to God's call for repentance and thinks the best option is to run.

2. God is Sovereign in Our Lives

Throughout this whole story but specifically in verses 4-8, we see our second point: that **God is Sovereign in our lives**, meaning he has supreme power.

This is shown in 4 main ways in Chapter One as well as 2 small ways. Right at the start we see Jonah finds a ship in Joppa. And in a small way, this is only through God's sovereignty. Joppa wasn't a Hebrew port, therefore isn't want just as easy as going up to any ship and boarding it. As well as this, a trip to Tarshish was the longest voyage across the Mediterranean Ocean and was totally dependent on the correct wind and conditions to start the voyage. God is in control of all the small details.

And second small evidence of God's sovereignty is seen in verse 5. Jonah fell into a deep sleep.

Now to Bekah's dissatisfaction, I like to sleep with a fan on at night, I like the white noise but I can't imagine being able to be in a deep sleep in the middle of a storm whilst on a boat.

Verses 3 and 5, when talking about Joppa and being in a deep sleep are actually connected. The NIV translation maybe doesn't do this justice but verse 3 says 'he went down to Joppa' and verse 5 says 'Jonah has gone below deck'. They both translate very similarly from the Hebrew. Both are an indication that when Jonah is troubled, he has tried to escape. Escape God by fleeing and escape the storm by going to sleep.

The four more obvious points of God's sovereignty, are found throughout our passage starting in verse 4, where it says 'The Lord sent a great wind'. Verse 7 when The Sailors cast lots and they fall on Jonah as the problem. Then verse 15 when God calms the raging storm and lastly in verse 17 when God sends a big fish to rescue Jonah.

God shows his control and sovereignty despite all of Jonah's mistakes.

God is in control of all things. From the smallest elements to the biggest. Everything in our lives comes under God's control and care of God despite our mistakes.

3. Salvation through Judgement and Mercy

Our third point is that Salvation comes through Judgement and Mercy.

Bekah is a big fan of The Wizard of Oz, she has told me she has watched it 100's of times growing up. Well in the West End, there is a show called Wicked which shows the story of the Wicked Witch of the West from her perspective. What you see is a very different story to that of Dorothy.

We see a real reversal in the character of the Wicked Witch. She's just bad in The Wizard of Oz but in the musical Wicked, we see her background and her personality very differently, she's good.

In verses 9-17, we see how everything is reversed. Jonah, the man of God, a prophet, who should be obedient and listen to God does not, instead, he is on the run. Whereas the pagan sailors, who shouldn't care about God, instead, fear him and are terrified. In verse 13 instead of throwing Jonah overboard, they try to row back to land, showing compassion on Jonah, even when they shouldn't care about the foreigner on their boat. Ultimately the pagan sailors, who should have no response to the God of Israel, turn around, repent, offers sacrifices and make vows to the Lord.

Everything is reversed from what it should be normally.

Within these reversals, we see that God is both a Judge but also a merciful saviour.

God is a good judge. Some may want to portray God as just a loving God and want to get rid of the idea of a God who judges people.

I don't know about you, but I wouldn't be a fan of a judge in our judicial system that just let everyone off and go free after doing things wrong. We want to see justice, fairly but put in place. And the God of all creation does that.

So when the pagan sailors are praying to all manner of gods, Yahweh, the true God shows his judgement, the waves get stronger, and the boat threatened to break up. One commentator said in a poor attempt at humour said the boat was a 'nervous wreck'.

Jonah is part of that judgement, the more he tries to run and hide from God the more things go wrong. Only when Jonah and the pagan sailors are obedient in accepting that Jonah is the problem and must be thrown overboard, is God's judgment satisfied. Then he stops the storm.

But God doesn't stop with Judgement. He brings salvation through it all because he is merciful.

The pagan sailors survive, the boat is intact and this leads to them repenting before God.

Jonah receives his judgement as he is thrown overboard and condemned to death in the sea. He rightly thinks death is what he receives from this ordeal. But God in his mercy brings Salvation in the form of a big fish.

God does this for all people. He will judge, rightfully, but he is also a merciful God that will accept all who turn to him, repent and believe in him.

And through the story of Jonah, he is showing Israel and then on to all humans throughout history, that fact. Salvation comes through the mercy of a loving father, who will rightfully judge all things.

Application

So what can we learn from Chapter 1?

The story of Jonah is unique among prophets because it focuses on the prophet rather than the prophecy.

Verse 1-3 show us that 'We must trust God's commands even if it confuses us or makes us uncomfortable at times, even if our emotions tell us otherwise'.

I don't say this so that we forgot our emotions, God created us with a wonderful array of complex feelings, thoughts and psychological make-ups. But God's word must reign supreme.

Jonah was caught up in his own emotion and instead of listening to God's word and doing as God told him, he did the exact opposite, leading him into trouble.

We must place God's word first in our lives. In the good times, when it's easy to but also when it's difficult. Maybe when we struggle to agree with something and have to work hard to figure out what God is saying. Or maybe we have to disagree with what the world might say on something to remain faithful to God's word.

God's word must come first above all other things.

The whole of Chapter 1 shows us that God is sovereign. That should be a wonderful encouragement to us. Sometimes we think we can't manage when the storms of life come along, as they did for Jonah. But we must remind ourselves and rely on the sovereign God of all things.

God does this despite our failures and mistakes. Jonah got things so wrong but God was faithful and in control of it all. He used it for Jonah's good, for the Ninevite's good and ultimately for our Good.

Romans 8:28 says 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.'

God works for the good of those who are perfectly obedient and get everything right. No, simply those who Love God!

Remember, God is sovereign, and he will restore us when we get it wrong. Whilst guiding us, when we follow him faithfully and love him.

And lastly, as we think through Jonah and the Sailors we see a God who is both a rightful judge as well as a merciful father that brings salvation to all who turn to him.

He brings salvation through both his Judgement, to show us our sin, leading to repentance and then through his mercy, giving us a chance to be reunited in a loving relationship with Himself.

This amazing mercy and salvation come's into its full light when we think about how Jesus saves all who believe in him through his work on the cross.

Jonah One lays the groundwork to see that God's rightful justice is only satisfied through some form of Judgement. For Jonah, this is seen in being thrown overboard, God is then merciful in sending a Fish.

One of the most beautiful things in the Book of Jonah is the allusions that point forward to Christ.

Like Jonah, we all deserved to be thrown into the sea for our sins. But God sent a big fish for Jonah to deliver him safely to Land. God provide us with a Vessel of Mercy too. Jesus on the cross, dying in our place. To bring our salvation into a reality!

And that is where we will land next week in Chapter 2. Thinking about how Jesus relates to Jonah.

Let's close in prayer.