

How not to be an effective missionary

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as was said earlier, myself and Jenny are working in South Africa, and because we are called to serve as Christians in another part of the world to that which we have normally lived in, we're called missionaries. And when missionaries come together, come back to the UK or from wherever they've come from, then they are often expected to bring some sort of missionary theme in what they have to say. Well, I hope that I can do something to help us to think about the notion of mission, but I just want to say a word at the beginning about this notion that we are missionaries and that that sets us in a particular group. Because in fact, from the beginning of the Christian life in somebody's heart, when Jesus comes to be their Savior, as God takes them and turns them into a new person, then they are sent as His witnesses. Jesus sends the first disciples, says, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

And when He calls us to be witnesses, He calls all of us to be witnesses. And some of us get sent to the ends of the earth, but some of us, if you like, stay in Jerusalem. So, I want to encourage us at the beginning of our service tonight not to think about missionaries and then people who aren't missionaries.

Rather, we are all sent to be Jesus' witnesses in whatever context He places us. And the question of whether that is across a geographical boundary or across a cultural boundary or across a linguistic boundary or any other kind of boundary is in a sense beside the point. We are all in the same boat called to be missionaries. But if we want to think about the theme of mission, and particularly the notion of foreign mission, then when I went to the Old Testament, I really discovered that there are very few places where you can find any distinct emphasis on foreign mission, the idea that God's people are sent beyond their own boundaries to bring a message to the nations. And in fact, one of the very few places that you can find that kind of idea is in the book of Jonah, which we read together.

But if you were looking for encouragement and something uplifting and cheerful in the book of Jonah, then you have come to the wrong place. You know, Jonah is one of those stories that we tend to tell our children very early on. We tend to share it with the children in Sunday school because it's very memorable. Come listen to my tale of Jonah and the whale. It's something that connects very much with a young mind. And yet, in a sense, the book of Jonah should almost have an 18 certificate on it because it is such a horrific book in some respects. It shows human sinfulness, human rebellion, human stubbornness in its darkest and in its most ugly form. And so, what I want to suggest to you here is that if we are looking as a church for something that will make us think, oh, great, we can have great confidence that our missionaries are doing a great job, then Jonah isn't going to fill us with that sense of confidence. In fact, we will see that Jonah just gets in the way all the time. But at the same time, I think that this book has huge power to encourage the church in the task of mission because it tells us where our real confidence should lie. It points us to where our real hope is that the mission of the church will succeed, and that is not, in fact, in the missionaries, but in the missionary

God. And so, if there's one thing that I want you to see from the book of Jonah, it's not Jonah at all. It's Jonah's God, and the fact that he is a missionary God. Now, I think that that should do two things.

[4 : 3 5] First of all, I hope that we can learn some lessons from Jonah. We can learn, perhaps, what not to do, but also we can have a proper caution about placing our confidence in the skills of any one person or the character or the qualities of any human being and find our real hope in God. So, to take a slightly unusual approach to a missionary talk, I want to speak tonight about how not to be an effective missionary, how not to be an effective missionary. And we'll see that Jonah exemplifies that for us perfectly, and I trust that we will not pay too careful attention to these lessons

so that we learn how to do it from Jonah, but rather that we will see what he does and take a different approach altogether. And remembering that this is not a lesson for the two people or the three people that end up being missionaries as we often class them, but a lesson for each one of us who are called by Jesus

Christ to be his witnesses. So, first lesson in how not to be an effective missionary, don't let your theology affect your actions. Don't let your theology affect your actions. Who is Jonah? Jonah, we're told, is the son of Amittai, and we're told elsewhere in 2 Samuel, if I remember correctly, that he is a prophet of God. God speaks to him. God speaks through him. If anyone should know God, then it's Jonah.

And what we discover is that Jonah knows God very, very well. Jonah knows his theology very, very well. It's faultless. It's perfect. And we see that expressed in a number of places in this chapter. For instance, when the sailors on the boat ask him in verse 8, what do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you? He answered, I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the land.

Now, there are a number of areas of very sound theology that are picked up here. First of all, he identifies God as the Creator God. He's got a good, solid creation theology. He doesn't have any of this division between the matter of the world and the Spirit. He's got a proper notion that God is the Creator. He's also got a notion that God is the covenant God of Israel. If you notice in that verse, when he talks about the Lord, the Lord is spelled in small capitals. That's a way that's used by English translations of pointing to the name of God, the covenant name, Yahweh, or more traditionally, Jehovah. That's the name that God chose to reveal Himself by when He said to His people, I am your people, and you, I am your God, and you are my people. So, Jonah has got a good sound creation theology, a good covenant theology, and if you then read through his prayer in chapter 2 of

[7 : 57] Jonah, you will also see many strong emphases, and perhaps one of the most famous statements is one of the most wonderful expressions of the whole of biblical theology. In a way, when you come to verse 9 of chapter 2, he says, salvation comes from the Lord. I've recently seen that as the title of an excellent book on the theology of the church, on systematic theology, and it's such a wonderful encapsulation of the Bible's message. But for all of this great theology that Jonah has, he doesn't let it affect his actions. So, what do we learn of Jonah? The Word of the Lord comes to Jonah again and tells him to go to Nineveh. Nineveh is a large city in what we might describe as Mesopotamia, the area between the two great rivers in the ancient Near East, and it wasn't a particularly attractive option, we have to say.

But the Word of the Lord came to Jonah, and he goes the other direction. Now, that's not because he was using Google Maps like we were today and found ourselves pointing in the wrong direction. It is because he chose to run away from the Lord. But what's this? Jonah is the one who understands that God is the one who dwells in heaven and made the world, brought about the sea and the land by His powerful Word. So, why does he think that getting on a boat is going to bring him out of the control, the power, the authority of the God of all creation? Why is it that Jonah's theology is so sound, and yet his actions seem to bear no relationship to that? He is also the one who simply seeks to disobey He knows that God is the one who sees him, the one who is all-present, the one who is sovereign.

He knows that God commands the wind and the waves, and yet he chooses to disobey that God, knowing that the outcome cannot surely be good. Here we see a first warning light to ourselves. If we are to be effective missionaries, effective witnesses for Jesus Christ, it's not sufficient that we know our theology. It's not sufficient that we can win a game of Bible-trivial pursuit. Sure, it's important to understand the details of Scripture. Sure, it's important to grasp something of the heart of the message of the gospel, but that message must hit home in our lives. It must transform our priorities.

It must transform our concerns. It must transform our hopes. It must transform the way that we carry out our daily lives. It must transform what we invest our money in, what we invest our time in, what we do when we are spending time with people, where we seek to spend time with people, who we will spend time with, how we will relate to them in these situations. All of those things, all of those day-to-day things have to be affected by what we believe about God, what we believe in our day about Jesus Christ as the Savior. And Jonah did not let it happen. Jonah rebelled against his theology, and what we get is irony in this first chapter. You see, the irony particularly is that Jonah is

being called to be a missionary, to be a witness, to be an impact on the lives of others. And Jonah refuses. But in refusing, he becomes an impact on the lives of others. He impacts the lives of the sailors.

What we find out about the sailors initially is that they are pagans. We get that fairly clearly expressed in verse 6 of chapter 1. The captain went to him and said, How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God. Now, you'll see there that God is spelt in the English version with a small g. It's certainly not spelt with capitals. It's whichever God you happen to pick. Then please pray to this God. But when we find that the sailors are praying later on in verse 14, they were told, then were told, that they cried to the Lord. Notice this time that they cried to the Lord with capital letters. They cried to the God of Israel. And they say, O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Again, for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased. And then, what's more, in verse 16, they greatly feared the Lord and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord. Now, what we find is that by the end of the chapter, Jonah has effectively brought about the conversion of the sailors to the God of Israel, not because of his testimony, not because of his obedience, but because they see that the God of Israel is alive, that He is active, and that He is dealing with this disobedient man in a way that they can only give this God their wholehearted allegiance. And we find, therefore, that despite Jonah's determination to be ineffective as a missionary, he becomes effective in spite of himself. Why? Because the Lord is in control. The Lord is in command of the situation, and He will work out His purposes. Now, another theme that we are starting to see in this passage is that the Lord has mercy. Now, I have to say that that's not immediately available in the message that Jonah is given. Go, in verse 2 of chapter 1, go to this great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. But we find the mercy of God expressed in the great fish.

[14:30] Now, perhaps we might not think that getting swallowed by a great fish would be an act of mercy, but it's quite clear from the account that the sailors expect Jonah to die. They expect that this prophet who has tried to rebel against the God of creation, the ultimate result of that is going to be his death. But the actual outcome is not what they expect, because as they throw this man into the sea, he is not swallowed up by the waves, he is swallowed up by a fish. Now, I don't think that we would particularly wish that experience ourselves, but in Jonah's case, it brings about his salvation, it brings about his deliverance. And we see, I think, in what Jonah says, salvation comes from the Lord, his understanding that God has rescued him from an apparently hopeless end, God has brought rescue. But does Jonah see how significant that is for his calling and his mission as God's servant?

So, how not to be an effective missionary? First lesson, don't let your theology affect your actions. But second lesson is, if you do what God wants, do it half-heartedly. When we're told in chapter 3 that Jonah is back on the dry land, he gets what we cannot assume for ourselves. He gets a second chance.

Now, we cannot use Jonah as a model for saying, well, we can afford to blow it once because we'll get a second chance. No, what we see here is overwhelming grace, that despite the fact that Jonah deserves to go down to the pit, that he deserves to stay down with the seaweed in the water, yet God has rescued him and given him a second chance. And the second chance is very obviously expressed with almost exactly the same word forms at the beginning of chapter 3 as came at the beginning of chapter 1, apart from the insertion of a second time. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. So, God shows great grace towards Jonah, and he says, go and preach against this great city of Nineveh. Well, we're told something about Nineveh. Nineveh was a huge city, a great city in terms of population, we learn that towards the end, also a great city in terms of its scale, and possibly also a great city in terms of its importance. And so, it would have required, we're told, a three-day visit. Whether that is the amount of time it takes to cross the city, or whether that's the appropriate amount of time that was taken to give due deference to its importance, is undecided. But what is clear is that Jonah hardly gets anywhere. He's only one day in to a three-day visit. What's more, his sermon is hardly the fullest expression of biblical eloquence. In fact, his sermon is one line long, or maybe one and a half.

Now, many congregations all around the country may long for sermons that are one and a half lines long, but in here, in this context, I think that Jonah provides us with an image of doing the least possible. But the response to that least possible effort is absolutely astonishing, overwhelming. We find that by the first day, the whole of the city has repented, and the fullness of the repentance is emphasized in a number of ways. It's emphasized by talking about the least to the greatest.

[18 : 36] It's emphasized by saying that the king himself humbled himself, and that humbling process is expressed in various steps. It's almost like a little step ladder down from the throne. We're told he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth, sat down in the dust, like a step ladder taking us further and further into repentance, into humbling of himself. But then see his proclamation. Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything. We're familiar with the notion of people fasting. But here we have animals fasting too. The notion of repentance is emphasized by its extent. We're also familiar with the notion that people would fast from food, but we're told in chapter 3, verse 7, that they are not to drink either. Again, the fullest extent of fasting. And then an interesting aspect of the king's proclamation is that he sees something that Jonah hasn't said anything about. He says, who knows, God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger. Jonah's not said a thing about compassion, but the king shows greater insight, perhaps, than Jonah, and he brings about.

He recognizes the possibility of compassion, and that's exactly what God brings about. So, if you do what God wants, do it half-heartedly. That's our second lesson. And yes, it's possible for Christians to go through the motions, to do what is expected of them in some half-hearted, just matter-of-fact way. But God calls us to bring good news to the nations. He calls us to share life-changing news. He calls us to be a witness to the world, a light to the world.

And if we have understood what it is that God has done for us, if we have understood that He has taken our sin and dealt with it completely, wiped it away, if we have understood that He's taken the barriers that exist between human beings for all kinds of reasons, and He demolishes those barriers, if we understand that He has brought us into His family and made us His children, then how can we possibly be about the business of sharing that news half-heartedly? Yes, we may struggle with it.

Yes, we may find it difficult. Yes, we may have to think carefully about how to do it appropriately and sensitively, but surely half-heartedness, only half an interest in it, is something that is foreign to somebody who has truly known what God has done in their lives. Jesus said of the lady who had poured the incense on her, she has been forgiven much, and so she loves much. And we need to know the same.

And perhaps Jonah had not recognized just what had happened to him, and we'll come back to that in a moment. So, we've seen that again, Jonah does the least possible, but the outcome is spectacular.

[21 : 58] How many evangelists, how many missionaries would long for Jonah's success? But again, we're seeing that it has little to do with Jonah, and it has everything to do with another factor, and we'll see that quite clearly. And then we come to the particularly frightening chapter. This is the chapter where all of our expectations are shattered for Jonah. Because, you know, when Jonah ran away, up to this point, we can perhaps empathize with him a little bit. Perhaps we can forgive him for running away just a little bit. We might say, well, you know, it was not the nicest bunch that he was called to go and minister to. This was the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians did nasty things to their enemies.

They weren't very polite. They certainly didn't hold to any Geneva convention or something like that. They were pretty brutal. So, we can understand that perhaps Jonah would have been scared. He would have been in fear of physical violence. Perhaps we can also suggest that Jonah might have thought, well, this is a bit of a big task for one man. Surely we need a team mission here. Maybe he was concerned that he might suffer burnout from such a huge task being placed on his shoulders, and he thought he would escape while the going was good. But chapter 4 removes all of those notions from our minds, because Jonah tells us plainly why he ran. And this is where we can only shudder at what Jonah says, and we can only reflect on our own experience very carefully. The third lesson, how not to be an effective missionary, is don't share God's heart for the lost. How not to be an effective missionary, the key lesson in Jonah. Don't share God's heart for the lost. You see, Jonah didn't run because he was afraid. He didn't run because the task was too big. He ran because he knew God, and he didn't like it.

Isn't that astonishing? Isn't that absolutely nerve wrangling, whatever? It is that God was so much, so well known by Jonah, that led to Jonah run. In verse 1, Jonah was greatly displeased. He wasn't just a little bit disappointed. He was greatly displeased. And he said in verse 2, O Lord, still praying to the covenant God of Israel in this language, still very politically and theologically correct, but 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. I

knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in love. And he didn't like it. Now, what didn't he like? Well, it's not that he didn't like that as long as that was directed towards Israel. He liked the fact that God was compassionate and slow to anger for Israel. What he didn't like was that God was going to do the same thing to these nasty Ninevites. He didn't like the fact that God was going to show his compassion to different people, other people, other nations, nations that Israel had persuaded themselves deserve nothing but destruction and to be wiped off the face of the earth. And yet there was something in Jonah that just knew that God was going to go and do something different. He was going to go and show mercy to these people. And he just didn't like it. Isn't that shocking? Now, I wonder what happens when we just take a moment to reflect about what we long for, for our neighbors in this world, what we long for, for the people who live in different countries and different cultures, what we long for, for our Muslim neighbors, what we long for, for our Hindu neighbors, what we long for, for our atheist neighbors, what we long for, for our pagan religion neighbors. What do we long for them? Do we long that Jesus Christ would become their Savior?

Do we long that God would pour out His grace on them? Do we long that they would be brought into our family and become our brothers and sisters? Or do we long that God would wipe them off the face of the earth? I trust that it is not the latter. But Jonah confronts us with the real possibility that someone who is called by God to be His witness could in fact be so out of touch with God's heart for the lost that they in fact want the very opposite. We trust that the Lord's work in our hearts would preserve us from that, but don't let us become complacent, because Jonah clearly is a warning sign to us. But you know, one of the most ironic things about Jonah is that he is passionate about other things. We find him actually in verse 5 going out to the east of the city, and there he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade, and waited to see what would happen to the city. Isn't that an illuminating phrase? He sat down to watch the fireworks. And yet, so in a sense, he's still holding out the possibility that God may still act in judgment. And so God then provides something that brings him peace, something that has no consequence in the grand scheme of things at all, and then God takes it away. And Jonah is just angry. Jonah is just bitter, and he's self-obsessed. And in the end, there is no conclusion for Jonah.

[28 : 40] There is no happy ending to Jonah, except that there is the happy ending that the words that remain ringing in our ear at the end of Jonah are not Jonah's words, but God's words. Let me just say one more thing about Jonah before I bring this to a conclusion. One of the problems Jonah had was that he just didn't understand his own history. Jonah was delighted that God showed mercy to Israel. Jonah was thrilled that God showed mercy to the people of Israel. I serve the God of Israel. I serve Yahweh, the covenant God.

But he would not have God, but he would not have God show mercy to those on the outside. But where did Israel begin?

Did it not begin when a man called Abram, who lived in a city called Ur, which lies in between the great rivers in the area we call Mesopotamia, when that man was plucked out of his paganism by a God who showed him absolutely undeserved grace? See, God didn't choose Abram because he was better than others, because he was holier, because he was faithful to the God of Israel when the others weren't. We're not told anything to suggest that about Abram. God chose Abram because he loved him. God chose Abram because he showed mercy to him. And that mercy that he showed towards Abram became the founding of the people of Israel, God's chosen people. And yet now that Jonah has become so conscious of God's blessing for Israel that he is determined that it will not be shared with his pagan neighbors, he has forgotten that it's because God showed mercy to his pagan neighbors that he exists as part of the people of God at all.

You know, whatever hopes and fears we have for the people around us, whatever sense of longing for God's mercy to be shown to them we have is probably going to be affected by the recognition that we have that God showed us mercy, that he brought us to himself just by absolutely undeserved grace and favor. So, we've seen how not to be an effective missionary, as exemplified by Jonah. Don't let your theology affect your actions. If you do what God wants, do it half-heartedly, and don't share God's heart for the lost. Now, obviously, I don't want you to learn those lessons.

I want you and I want me, as those who are called to be God's disciples, God's witnesses, to learn from Jonah by being the very opposite, to do allow our theology to affect our actions, to do what God wants wholeheartedly, and to share God's heart for the lost. And we trust that by his Spirit

living within us as the people of God, he will enable us to do these things. But ultimately, I think that what Jonah leaves us with is the sense that we cannot put our trust in any given missionary, in any given minister, in any given individual in the church, because ultimately we have hearts that aren't so different from Jonah. But what we can have confidence in is despite all that Jonah appears to do to thwart God's plans, to get in the way of God's mission, God will still see his mission fulfilled. He will still bring to himself his chosen people, he will still have mercy on those that he will have mercy. And isn't that the confidence that the book of Jonah gives us? Isn't that the wonderful assurance we have? God will make sure that his mission is carried out. So, let us tonight determine before God that we will not be like Jonah and stand in his way, but rather that we will walk with God and seek in whatever way we can to serve him and to allow him to work through us as he completes his mission. Let's pray.