

Jonah 1

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[0 : 0 0] you'll turn with me back to the book of Jonah again that's on page 928 so as we begin I have a confession to make I chose the topic for this sermon before things had gotten completely crazy with the coronavirus and then as time went on things did get completely crazy but by that point I felt it was perhaps too late to start trying to change the sermon and to choose a passage that might be more obviously relevant so we're staying with Jonah this morning but that may not be a bad thing because in fact the book of Jonah has certain things that it emphasizes and those are things that are perhaps helpful to be for us to be reminded of precisely in a time like the one we find ourselves in so we're going to be looking at Jonah this morning if you were to play a word association game with someone you know that sort of game so somebody says night and you say day somebody says husband and you say wife somebody says dark and you say light if they were to say Jonah what would you say we would say whale Jonah and the whale we think at least commonly in our culture if people are familiar with the story of Jonah they think that it's a story about a great fish a great whale and it is certainly the true that the word great or the word big occurs a lot in the book just out of interest if you look at some of the places with me just to get a sense of how it's emphasized so in verse 2 God says go to the great city of Nineveh in verse 4 then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea in verse 10 this terrified them literally it says they feared a great fear in verse 12

I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you in verse 16 again we read that the men greatly feared the Lord they feared a great fear and then in verse 17 now the Lord provided a huge fish a great fish the same word in the original language repeated over and over again a great city a great wind a great fear a great fish later on the book talks about a great joy a great evil the book of Jonah is quite a small book about very big things and when an author of one of the books of the Bible or I suppose really any author when they repeat something over and over again they're wanting you to notice because they're making a point and the author of the book of Jonah is making a point but it's not a point about a great fish the fish the fish is only mentioned actually twice in the book he plays a very important part but the book of Jonah isn't really a book about a great fish the book of Jonah actually is a book about a great God one of the things that the book of Jonah is emphasizing perhaps the thing that it's emphasizing is the greatness of God and at a time with so much uncertainty and so many things that were maybe very profoundly worried about when you don't know if your children will be going to school tomorrow when you don't know if you'll be going to work tomorrow you may not know if you're going to have work or if you're going to have employment we may have loved ones that we're very concerned about or perhaps even ourselves depending on our health maybe we have very great concerns about our health at a time like that perhaps it's very helpful to us for us to be reminded of the greatness of our God and as we look at the book of Jonah this morning there are two things particularly that I would draw your attention to two ways in which God is great first of all God is great in power and then secondly we'll see that God is great in compassion and mercy so first of all God is great in power do you notice something strange about verse 9 everything seemed to be falling to pieces the sailors were afraid that not just that their boat was going to sink but actually that it was going to be smashed to pieces and they finally work out that all of this has something to do with Jonah and they want to know who Jonah is and what he's done and they ask him and he answers I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land most of you will be familiar with the book of Jonah Jonah as a person has lots of issues doesn't he

Jonah has problems but everything that Jonah says is true and this statement in verse 9 what he says about God anyway everything that he says about God is true he says I'm a Hebrew and I worship Yahweh I worship the Lord the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land all of that is true the God of Israel the God whom he said he worshiped was the God of heaven and he had made the sea and the dry land but what is Jonah doing when he says that he's running away from this God on the sea and how is that going to go for Jonah not very well is it and it didn't if you look in verse 4 the Lord sent a great wind on the sea and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up the forces of nature it was God who sent that wind it was God who sent that storm and therefore that storm reveals to us the power of God that great storm was just a tiny revelation of the infinite overwhelming power of the God who sent it these people were experiencing the power of God they were experiencing it actually in a way that was overwhelming and terrifying the book of Jonah reveals to us the power of God in very obvious ways in the overwhelming terrifying power of this storm it's also interesting to notice that the people in this book experience the power of God in other ways not just in very big obvious ways but if you look later on in the book in chapter 4 then the Lord provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head and to ease his discomfort and Jonah was very happy about the plant look at verse 7 but at dawn the next day God provided a worm which chewed the plant so that it withered in verse 8 when the sun rose God provided a scorching east wind it's interesting it's the same word repeated over God provided the plant

God provided the wind God provided the scorching east wind actually if you look back at chapter 1 in verse 17 God provided the whale all of these things were sent by God ironically unlike Jonah they all did exactly what they were supposed to do but when you look at the experience that Jonah was going through even the most minute details of his life were in the hand of God you see the power of God is shown to us in this book in very obvious ways in this overwhelming storm but we also see the power of God revealed in the minute details of Jonah's life everything was in God's hand so these people had experienced the power of God and it's important for us to say that we have experienced the power of God the creation itself testifies to God's power at the moment everything in the news understandably is about this virus but if you think back a month ago everything in the news was about the storms that we were experiencing storm Chiara and storm Dennis and storm Jorge

I live in Edinburgh now before that I used to live in the Isle of Skye maybe some of you are familiar with that or you may be even from there the house that we lived in was a very old house it was a stone house with massive big stone walls the rafters in the roof were big heavy beams but nevertheless the weather in Skye is terrible you'll know and there would regularly be gales and you would be sitting in this massive stone house and the whole house would tremble because of the force of the storm recently in the past month we have experienced again more parts of the United Kingdom have experienced storms like that winds up to 100 miles an hour at some points gusts over the sea 140 miles an hour we have experienced something very like what these people have experienced and we need to appreciate when that happens that it's revealing to us the power of God

[10 : 35] I want to point out as well that the Bible refers to another event that reveals to us the overwhelming power of God and we see that in Jesus' resurrection you see we might have a question we experience storms like that we see the forces of nature and we recognize that that testifies to something greater than us how do we know that it's this God how do we know that it's the God of the Bible well the God of the Bible has acted very clearly in human history to reveal himself to us and for example in Jesus' resurrection which is a fact of history it's something that we can know happened on one occasion the apostle Paul was praying for the church in Ephesus and he said I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened there's something

Paul wants them to know something that's true of them but that they might not fully appreciate he says I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you the riches of his glorious inheritance and his holy people and his incomparably great power for us who believe that's not what I'm getting to but that's striking isn't it that that power of God has been at work even individually in our lives but notice that Paul goes on to say that power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him on his right hand in the heavenly realms far above all rule and authority power and dominion in every name that is invoked not only in the present age but also in the one to come God has preeminently revealed his power before all the nations in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead our God is powerful he is overwhelmingly powerful we see that power revealed in the forces of nature even around us we see that power revealed in history in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead by the Holy Spirit we know that power at work in our lives what effect should that have upon us what effect did it have on the sailors notice in verse 16 this is really quite remarkable these were pagan sailors the beginning of the story each one of them is crying out to his own God and as a result of what they have just seen at this the men greatly feared the Lord before they were scared of the storm now they're scared of Yahweh perhaps we shouldn't say that they were scared of God they had a reverence for God and they offered sacrifices to the Lord and made vows to him when we come to recognize how powerful

God is it should humble us and it should lead us to worship him we should be filled with an overwhelming sense of awe as we consider who God is so first of all the power of God should lead us to worship him secondly we should say that a recognition of God's power leads us to take comfort this is perhaps particularly relevant in the present circumstances on one occasion Jesus was teaching and he says are not two sparrows sold for a penny yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside of your father's care and even the very hairs of your head are all numbered so don't be afraid you are worth more than many sparrows the Bible consistently teaches that our God is powerful and that our God is in control and that nothing happens outside of his power now that can raise lots of questions for us can't it why did God allow a certain thing to happen why did God allow a certain village to be flooded why has God allowed the pandemic that's taking place at the moment we may have lots of specific questions but the thing that the Bible emphasizes is that we can take comfort in this it would be worse if these things were outside of God's control it would be worse if we lived in a chaotic world in which no one was sovereign but through

Jesus and we will come back to this in a moment we can know God as our father in heaven and even though you will be filled with questions and even though there are things that you don't know we can trust him and we can know that he is good and he is in control are not even the very hairs of your head all numbered not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of your father in heaven so don't be afraid you are worth more than many sparrows you can know that you are valuable to God and you can take comfort therefore in the fact that he is powerful and he is in control so first of all as we look at the book of Jonah we see that it reveals to us a God who is great in power but secondly it reveals to us a God who is great in mercy and this is perhaps the most fascinating thing about the book one of the fascinating things about the book of Jonah is the way that it catches us out it's a very short book so you know the end but when we start reading the book there are two things that either we don't know or we're not certain and they both have to do with motivation two things about which we're not certain at the beginning of the book the first thing is why God is sending

Jonah to Nineveh and the second thing is why Jonah won't go to Nineveh okay with regards to the first one in verse two we read go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me now on that way of understanding the statement what's motivating God why is God sending Jonah to Nineveh go and preach against Nineveh because its wickedness has come up before me but we assume that it's God's wrath God's anger that's motivating him to send Jonah to Nineveh with regards to well I should point out that another way of understanding that verse the words some of the words can have more than one meaning and it would equally be possible to translate that verse go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to it because its calamity has come before me now on that understanding of the verse if God is sending

[18:30] Jonah to preach to Nineveh because their calamity because their dangerous situation has come up before him what's motivating God to send Jonah to Nineveh it's not his anger is it it's his compassion for them so with regard to God there's ambiguity to begin with why he's sending Jonah as to why Jonah runs away we're not told it simply doesn't say not at first now if I read to you a passage from the Bible that describes Nineveh think how you would answer those two questions this comes from the book of Nahum Woe to the city of blood full of lies full of plunder never without victims the crack of whips the clatter of wheels galloping horses and jolting chariots charging cavalry flashing swords and glittering spears many casualties piles of dead bodies without number people stumbling over the corpses all because of the want and lust of a prostitute alluring the mistress of sorceries who enslaved the nations by her prostitution and people by her witchcraft okay that's a description of what

Nineveh has done the piles of corpses of the people that they have killed so given that's what Nineveh was like when we come back to Jonah chapter one what do we think is motivating God to send Jonah we assume that it's his wrath and anger and why is Jonah running away I think a fair assumption would be to say that he's scared he doesn't want to go to Nineveh because he's scared they'll kill him I would be scared to go to Nineveh but if we were to make those two assumptions we would be wrong because when we come to the end of the book of Nineveh sorry the end of the book of Jonah what is it that was in 11 but the Lord said you've been concerned about this plant though you did not tend it or make it grow it sprang up overnight and died overnight and should

I not have concern of the great city of Nineveh in which there are more than 120 thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left also many animals he adds curiously what was motivating God to send Jonah to Nineveh it wasn't his wrath he was sending Jonah to Nineveh to warn them okay his wrath was related to that their wickedness justly deserved his wrath and they were in danger of that but God is merciful and so he sent Jonah to warn them that they might repent so if we assume that God's motivation is his desire to destroy them we've misunderstood what was motivating God and also if we assume that Jonah was running away because he was scared of them we are wrong notice in chapter 3 in verse 10 when

God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened okay he had been warning them they turned from their wickedness and God had mercy upon them so Jonah rejoices wouldn't you rejoice these terrible wicked people against all expectation they have recognized the wickedness of what they have done and they have turned to the true God and sought mercy and Jonah will be delighted but he's not in in in chapter in chapter 4 but to Jonah this seemed very wrong and he became angry he prayed to the Lord isn't this what I said Lord when I was still at home that's what I that is why I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God slow to anger and abounding in love a God who relents from sending calamity

Jonah didn't go to Nineveh because he didn't want them to be saved he knew that God was merciful and he was afraid that God might be merciful to the Ninevites and he wanted them to perish that is a remarkable thing isn't it quite a fearful thing in a sense what was motivating Jonah and there is something profoundly ironic in chapter one do you notice how the sailors behave the sailors are scared they're going to die and then they realize that the reason that they're about to die is because of Jonah he has put their lives in danger what would you expect them to do throw Jonah overboard they've already thrown all their cargo overboard you'd expect them to send Jonah over the side they don't do that they ask

[24 : 02] Jonah what to do and Jonah actually says throw me over the side they they don't throw him over and they try all the harder to get to shore because they are more like God than Jonah the pagan sailors are merciful and compassionate and slow to anger the irony in chapter one is that the sailors are more like God than Jonah and why is it that Jonah told them to throw him overboard if Jonah was thrown overboard humanly speaking what would happen to Jonah he would die Jonah's only expectation being thrown overboard is that he was going to die and then what would not happen he would not go to Nineveh and he would not warn them it would seem that

Jonah hatred of the Ninevites was so great that he would rather die than see them saved and in case you think I'm being too hard on Jonah or that I'm reading too much into it notice chapter 4 verse 3 what Jonah says now Lord take away my life for it is better for me to die than to live that is a remarkable thing Jonah knew that God was merciful but he didn't want God to be merciful now the mercy of God two things that I would like you to take away in light of that first of all it should challenge you and for the sake of time I'll try to be very brief it should challenge you and it should encourage you yes first of all it should challenge you in a time like the one we find ourselves in our natural focus is upon ourselves not other people that's why people are panicked by that's why it seems absurd but you literally can't find toilet roll in the shops because people are hoarding things we naturally look out for ourselves look at what

God does should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh in which there are more than 120 000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left God the character of God is to look to others and that's what he was challenging Jonah to do and that's what we need to learn to do you live in Aberdeen a city not of 120 I suppose is it more like 200 thousand people you live in a city of hundreds of thousands of people who don't know their right hand from their left as Christians we live in a society of people who are in terrible danger not because of storms not because of COVID 19 they are in terrible danger because their sins have separated them from God and we have a message that they need to hear as Christians we need to be challenged to make that message known perhaps our motivation isn't quite the same as

Jonah maybe we aren't that antagonistic to the people around us but perhaps we still are doing very little to actually make that message known we should be challenged by that with regards to people's spiritual state with regards to people's physical well-being this is an opportunity which we as God's people have an opportunity to show very real practical concern for people around us that will be difficult for us because one of the ways we would normally do that is by being with people there are many folk with whom we can't be present because they might be particularly susceptible we need to think about how we demonstrate compassion how we reach out to people the book of Jonah is challenging us God is compassionate he looks to other people and so that should challenge us but I want to conclude by saying that this fundamentally should encourage us because if we think back to our first point simply the fact that

God is sovereign the fact that he is powerful that he is in control that would not necessarily be very encouraging to us if we had questions about that God's character or that God's attitude toward us if we thought that God was indifferent to us that he just really didn't care about me or if we thought that this God was hostile toward me the Ninevites had plenty of reason to think that God would be hostile toward them because of what they had done Jonah had given God plenty of reason to be hostile toward him and yet God was unfailingly patient with Jonah if we simply thought that God was powerful it wouldn't be very encouraging to us but the book of Jonah is driving home the point that God is compassionate Jonah knew that the

[29 : 32] Ninevites came to experience that we have even greater reason to know that God is compassionate I was speaking to somebody recently an international student from China and she was saying if people are fundamentally sinful and she accepted that was true she said if we are like that how can we know that God loves us that is an excellent question how can we know that God cares for us that he loves us in the New Testament we read this is how we know what love is Jesus Christ laid down his life for us it's in 1st John chapter 3 1st John chapter 4 the apostle says this is love not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins you can know that

God loves you this God who is sovereign this God who is powerful and in control of all things he cares for you I don't know you maybe some of you here this morning are not Christians maybe there are things in your lives that make you think God couldn't possibly accept me God forgave the Ninevites maybe you're here this morning and you're a Christian but your life has not been the way it should have been Jonah spent chapters 1 and 2 being actively hostile to the will of God and he spent chapters 3 and 4 being passively aggressive toward God sort of going through the emotions of doing what he had to do but not really wanting to do it and maybe that's how we feel and again it causes us to question God's attitude toward us as we look to the book of Jonah and most importantly as we look to Jesus we can know that

God is merciful and compassionate and so in very uncertain times in very worrying times we can be reminded of who our God is he is a God who is great in power and he is a God who is great in mercy we bow our heads as we pray our father in heaven we rejoice that you have revealed yourself to us through your son we rejoice to know that you have first loved us and sent Jesus to be our savior we rejoice that you have had mercy upon us and have sought us out when we would never have sought you as we leave here today we pray that we would go out even in the midst of the difficulties and the trials that we face we pray that we would be able to rejoice knowing that we know the all powerful creator of the heavens and the earth as our father in heaven as the

God who loved us and gave his son that we might be reconciled to you we ask that you would uphold this congregation and watch over them and bless them we pray even for those who are unable to be here today we think of those who have had to self isolate the young people who are away at the weekend we pray that you would draw near to them we ask that you would uphold us and give us physical strength and most of all father we pray that you would strengthen us in