

To the Ends of the Earth?

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if you have ever had the experience of seeing the film before reading the book. The film comes out, it gets rave reviews, it's a must-see, but you say to yourself, I must read the book first. And then time goes on, you don't read the book, and you just go and see it, and it's as good as everyone said it would be.

And then, a while later, someone lends you the book, a friend perhaps, and as you begin to read, you think, oh, hang on, I don't remember seeing this bit in the film. I don't remember this character being there. I don't think this conversation happened at all. And as you read, you realize how much was missed out in the film, how much of the story and the detail was missing. Well, I think for grown-ups, as many of us are, coming to the book of Jonah can be a bit like that. Perhaps you heard the story growing up in church, or perhaps even if you didn't, probably you know that in the Bible, there's something about a guy getting swallowed by a fish or a whale or some kind of sea creature. We know how the story goes, don't we? Many, if not all of us, could give a 10-second summary of the book of Jonah. In fact, I'd love to hear some of yours, perhaps, after the service. It's a wonderful story, isn't it? Perfect for picture books and bedtime stories. But then we come and read the book, and we find when we open God's Word that there is plenty of story and detail in here that didn't make it into the final cut when someone told it to us when we were young. Even in the first chapter, there are surprises for us, aren't there? He has the big speaking part.

Well, it's not Jonah, it's the sailors, isn't it? They do all the speaking. And the fish? Well, the fish is barely in it. And Jonah? Well, Jonah is a much quieter and shadier character than we remember, isn't he? What is he up to? As we come to this book, the biggest surprise of all we find is God himself, what God is doing. As we see here that the creator of everything cares to save people who have turned from him in sin. In this chapter, God sends his prophet to an evil city. And even though the prophet goes the other direction, God's mission to save his enemies does not stop. He goes to save lost sailors. He goes to save lost sailors and the evil city and even his rebellious runaway prophet. The surprising message of this chapter is that God, our creator, cares to save his sinful creatures, whoever we are. And his purpose to save cannot be stopped even by our sinful, stubborn refusal of his authority to save. But why? Why would God's people, why would we as God's church refuse God and his power to save? Well, meet Jonah. Jonah is a prophet who chooses to descend into chaos rather than take God's words to an evil city. Firstly then, Jonah descends into chaos. Look with me at verse one, if you would.

[3 : 43] The word of 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. Jonah runs away from the Lord. Now, sometimes we can imagine that Jonah is some kind of unbeliever. Does this man know God at all? But what makes it really shocking is that Jonah was God's prophet, a person set apart to speak God's words to others. In fact, we see Jonah doing his job in 2 Kings chapter 14. The king and Israel at that time, we read, did what was evil in the sight of the Lord? But then from verse 25 of that chapter, we read, the king restored the border of Israel from Lebohamath 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-Hepha. But the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left.

He said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam, the son of Joash. In summary, evil king and evil nation, but God's king and God's nation, and so God gave Jonah the prophet the task of speaking his gracious words to a king and a nation who were far from him. The words that that nation would grow and expand and prosper,

Israel at that time did not deserve that. The nation did not deserve what Jonah said or what God did, and yet Israel did not turn back from their evil. That king and that nation never again turned to the Lord for forgiveness. Now, fast forward to Jonah chapter 1. God's word comes once again to Jonah. Go to another city, another nation, Nineveh, the capital city of Israel's rival and enemy, Assyria. God says, go up and go over there. That's surprising, isn't it? Another evil city, another evil nation, but this time not God's city and not God's nation. And the very idea of that, verse 3, Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. Jonah says, no. He goes in the opposite direction. Tarshish was west,

Nineveh was east. It's as if he's saying, I need to get as far as possible from this plan. In fact, Jonah doesn't just go a long distance this way. He goes a long distance this way, down, down into the sea. Notice, verse 3, he went down to Joppa and found a ship. And once he's in the ship, verse 4, the Lord sent a great wind on the sea. Such a violent storm that the ship threatened to break up.

Now, we have to understand those few sentences are an Israelite's worst nightmare. We saw this recently, didn't we, in Psalm 33. The Hebrew people did not take their holidays by the seaside. Because the sea, even though in itself is a good part of God's good creation, often in Scripture, it stands as a symbol for everything that is anti-God, against God. So, Psalm 93, verse 3, the floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice. The floods lift up their roaring. For the psalmist there, the floods are representing the chaotic evil that is weighing down on him. And yet, God is King and Lord, even over the sea, over the anti-God chaos, over his enemies.

[8 : 08] The very next verse reads, mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea. The Lord on high is mighty. So desperate is Jonah to get away from God's words. He runs straight to the anti-God place. Down and down he goes. Verse 3, he goes down to Joppa. Verse 5, literally, he went down into the inner part of the ship. Chapter 2, verse 6, he says, I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever. He's describing a downward spiral. Down and down he goes into the deep darkness of the chaos. See, the sea does not simply teach us geography. It's here to show us Jonah's spiritual state, that at heart he has run straight down into everything that is against God.

That is how strongly he refuses to take God's words to Nineveh. But why? Why does Jonah do that? Why give up his prophetic role? Why openly rebel against the God who he serves? Well, perhaps you've heard people say how bloodthirsty and cruel the people of Nineveh were. And it's true, the fear of that empire turning up on the doorstep would have kept kings awake at night. But Jonah didn't run from God because he was afraid of what the Ninevites would do to him. Nor did Jonah run from God because he hated Ninevites and didn't want them to hear God's words. Well, listen to why Jonah says he ran away.

If you'd just flip over with me to chapter four and verse two. Looking back on the time he ran away, Jonah prayed to the Lord and said, Oh Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster. Why did Jonah run from God? Well, because he knew just what God was like and he didn't like it. That's why I ran, he said, because I knew right then who you were, Lord.

I know what you're about and I had to get away. Let's pause there for a minute. Can we, as Christians, ever, ever feel anything like that?

It's a terrible sin, isn't it, to know who God is and yet to turn our backs on him. But is it so far from our hearts that we never know what that is like?

[11 : 12] God saves someone who you would never have given a second thought to. God saves you, that real evil sinner over there, but your best friend, your husband, your wife, the one you love, doesn't show a flicker of interest in Jesus.

God sends your church through a time of loss and pain and struggle, while the church down the road that you don't agree with goes from strength to strength and doesn't hit the same roadblocks and grows and flourishes. Christ is worshipped and lifted high in a faraway country that you've never heard of, while your country spirals the spiritual plug hole.

We know what you're like, God. So gracious, so patient, so powerful to save.

But what about the things I care about? My friends, my church, my nation, what in your holy name are you playing at? Can a Christian ever feel anything like that?

I know I can. God is holy, but if only we could get his priorities straightened out. If only we could knock off his rough edges.

[12:39] No. God is holy and pure and perfect. And it is our rough edges that need worn away. And it is our priorities that need straightened out.

Jonah ran from God because he knew that God was gracious. That he was slow to anger and full of love. And he knew that was why he was being sent to an evil city.

Remember, God's own nation, Israel, still needed to turn and repent. Still needed to be forgiven. They still needed to hear God's words.

Nineveh wasn't on God's agenda. Nineveh was not God's city. And yet God, in his limitless grace, in his love, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free, of which we have just sung, cared to save that great evil pagan city.

Jonah knew it. And he wanted no part of it. I wonder, who might God care to save that you would have a real problem sharing the good news of Jesus with?

[13:49] Or to put it differently, who might you find it difficult to imagine sitting here in church with us? Perhaps it's people around us who seem to just have so much baggage.

And so many needs. And so much brokenness. A history. Lots of struggles. Perhaps it's your respectable colleague at work.

But he makes jokes about your faith in the office. Perhaps it's the friend or the family member who changes the conversation when you start talking about what's going on at church.

Just shuts it down. Doesn't want to hear. Those difficult people in our lives. Far from God. Those people who we might wish the ground would open up and swallow us rather than speak to them about the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps you can picture them. Well, verse 2 suggests that perhaps, perhaps those people are exactly who God will give you the opportunity of sharing Jesus with.

[15:07] In fact, one way to guard our hearts against Jonah's sin is to pray for those people who the very thought of sharing Jesus with them makes us shy away.

What does Jesus say? Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Pray for opportunity. Pray that they might be softened. Pray that they might be saved.

See what the Lord does in our hearts. What doors he opens in our lives when we pray for those people. For opportunity to speak the good news of Jesus to those who we find hard to love.

Unlike Jonah, we cannot know who God will bring to repentance and faith. But we do know that he wants us to speak his gracious and life-giving words to those who are lost.

As we all once were. I wonder who was it who first shared the good news of Jesus with you. I wonder how it made them feel to do it.

[16:10] We worship a God who cares to save his sinful creatures, whoever we are. Whoever we are. We see that so clearly when we look at the next characters in this story, the sailors.

Jonah boards a boat and of course he is not the only one going to sea. So when God who rules all the chaos of the sea sends a storm, well these sailors are caught up in it as well.

But where Jonah the prophet is completely unresponsive to God, these pagan sailors, knowing only very little about God, we see that they do in fact respond rightly to him.

Secondly, then we see the sailors grow in fear. The sailors grow in fear. Look with me at the surprising differences between Jonah and the sailors.

Verse 4, we see the storm God sends. It's so bad the ship is breaking apart. And then verse 5, all the sailors are afraid. And each cried out to his own God.

[17:15] They threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. Now these guys would have weathered their fair share of storms at sea. They were hardened sailors. So the fact that they are afraid tells us just how bad this storm is that God has sent.

So bad that they know that it is not only a natural event, but it has a supernatural origin. And so they begin crying out to their gods.

They throw their precious goods over the side. Now, no, it's true. These guys do not yet know the true and living God. And yes, they do turn to their idols and things that are not gods.

But these guys were not idiots, were they? Working with only what they knew. The sailors praying and their hurling of their stuff. They're perfectly natural responses to the storm.

Certainly compared to what Jonah does at the end of verse 5. Jonah had gone below deck where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

[18:25] How on earth could he be sleeping through this storm? Perhaps in his protest against God, he'd stopped caring about the consequences. Indeed, in verse 12, he offers to go overboard.

So great is his despair. Perhaps though Jonah didn't really think that God would bother to come after him. He knew, as he says, he is the Lord, the God who made heaven and earth, the sea and the dry land.

So Jonah knew that God could find him. But perhaps he thought God wouldn't care enough to find him. He would just lead him to his doom. But in any case, what Jonah is not doing when God sends the storm is praying to his God.

He's not crying to God for help. He's not saying sorry to God for his sin. He's not worshipping God as the creator and king of the whole earth. No, he is sleeping.

And it is the idolatrous captain of the ship, verse 6, who has to say to the prophet of God, what are you doing? Get up and call to your God.

[19 : 35] Maybe he will take notice of us and we will not perish. We're all praying to our gods. Try your God, the true and living God. Perhaps, perhaps he will spare a thought for us and rescue us.

This guy is so unassuming, isn't he? If this captain had known of the Lord, no doubt he would have prayed humbly to him in the hope of being saved.

But what does Jonah say to him? Well, he does not say a word to him about the God who alone can rescue. I wonder if all the people in our society, I wonder if the people that we shy away from most, from telling people about the good news of Jesus, is people who pray to other gods, people who follow other religions, the Muslim neighbors on our street, perhaps, the Sikh family at school.

How could they follow Jesus? Perhaps we think they would be offended if we suggested it, and they might be offended. But the captain reminds us that those who pray to other gods are sometimes not far from the kingdom of heaven.

If only they had a chance to hear about the true God and call on his name and trust in his son and be saved. Well, with Jonah now awake and the storm still raging, the sailors decide to cast lots to see whose fault it all is.

[21 : 19] And of course, the lot falls on Jonah. The sailors grill him, verse 8, tell us who is responsible for making all this trouble for us.

Jonah replies to all their questions, verse 9, It's an ironic answer, isn't it?

Does he fear the Lord, the God of heaven? He knows full well the foolishness of what he's doing and that the Lord is angry with him for doing it. Verse 10 tells us they knew he was running away from the Lord because he had already told them so.

But even knowing all this, even owning up to it, he still does not repent. Again, even the pagan sailors can see he's got it wrong.

This terrified them and they asked, What have you done? See, in the story, it is not the pagan idol worshippers who are the idiots.

[22 : 26] They know that you do not run from the God who controls everything. The gods that they knew about controlled certain patches of land or part of the weather.

But Jonah is running from the creator and king of the whole world. And so just as they were right to be afraid of the supernatural storm, so they are even more afraid of offending the true and the living God.

They know that his sin is madness. Knowing now the God that they are dealing with, no doubt these sailors would have repented, turned to their creator for forgiveness.

They would be crazy not to. But Jonah does not say a word, nor does he turn to his God. What shall we do then, they ask?

Well, verse 12, Jonah replies in his despair, Pick me up and throw me into the sea. It will become calm. I know it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.

[23 : 34] Jonah knows God is angry with him and seems to think that going even deeper into the watery chaos will fix it. Anything. Anything. Anything but turning back to God for forgiveness and speaking his words to those real evil sinners over there.

But the sailors know better now than to do what Jonah asks. Jonah brought such evil on them, but what do they do for him? Verse 13, the men did their best to row back to land, but they could not for the sea grew even wilder than before.

These sailors who have just thrown their own precious goods over the side of the ship now refuse to throw the cause of all their problems over the side of the ship. These guys care far more about saving Jonah's life than he cared about their well-being or survival or indeed their eternal salvation.

Do you hope you see that as a huge twist in the plot? Isn't that the truth of the situation? I wonder, are you prepared to meet non-Christian people who care more about other people than you do? We know that God's rescue is because of his grace. It's not because of our standards or our efforts or merits. But that means that sometimes we as Christians will come across people in our lives who, in God's common grace, are more moral people than we are.

[25 : 14] We had a neighbor in Edinburgh who, before we moved away, messaged me two or three times to see if I would like to meet up and chat. But before I even replied to him to say that I would love to, he cared more about reaching out to me than I cared about reaching out to him.

I would have happily gone on as we were at a comfortable distance. And it was really humbling. And I had to repent of my uncaringness for this guy and his life.

But if that kind of thing hasn't happened to you yet, well, it will. The sailors put Jonah to shame. But that doesn't mean they didn't need forgiveness.

It doesn't mean my moral neighbor needed forgiveness because all our righteousness, all our care, is like filthy rags before the Holy One. Friends, our moral neighbors need Jesus just as much as we do.

And ultimately, that is what the sailors find, isn't it? When they see they can't get out of this storm, verse 14, they cried out to the Lord.

[26 : 30] Let's not brush over that. They now cry out to the true and living God. O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life and lay not on us innocent blood.

For you, O Lord, have done as it pleased ye. The sailors know only that the God they are dealing with is the king of the whole world.

And they know that this God does what he pleases, not what we please. That, of course, is a lesson Jonah still has to learn.

And with those two things and nothing else to go on, the sailors ask God for his mercy, for what they are about to do. They took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. And then they stopped being afraid? No, then they discovered there was something to be feared even more than the storm, verse 16.

[27 : 29] At this, the men greatly feared the Lord. And they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. See, these sailors know virtually nothing about God, but can they respond rightly to him?

You bet they can. And they do. They worship him in repentance and in faith. They see he is the one to be feared, the one to worship, the one to commit one's life to honoring.

Moments ago, these men were praying to all gods and none. Now they throw all that away, and they turn to worship instead the true and living God, their creator and their redeemer.

If you're here this evening, and you're not a Christian, maybe you're finding out about Christianity, well, please think on that. You don't need to know much about God to start trusting him and worshiping him.

You might be here with loads of questions. And that's great. We welcome that. Ask your questions. But you don't need to have all the answers before you turn and trust in the God who rescues the Lord Jesus Christ.

[28 : 48] Later in the Bible, we see in Mark's Gospel, chapter 4, that Jesus also slept through a storm at sea. Waves were crashing into the boat, and his disciples found Jesus asleep, just as they had found Jonah.

They woke him and said to him, Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? Was Jesus the same as Jonah, uncaring? Well, no, this is where we see one greater than Jonah was here.

Did he care that they were perishing? Jesus awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

Jonah slept because he had given up caring. Jesus slept because he had never stopped caring. He is the one who rules the sea.

He cared to save those who at that time did not know who on earth he was. But how did they respond? They were filled with great fear and said to one another, Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

[30 : 01] The disciples, like the sailors, knew they could only be dealing with the true and living God, the one who created all things, who rules all things, and who saves all who call on his name.

They knew so very little, but they knew what they needed to know to respond rightly to him. And so they feared and trusted and worshipped Jesus, their God.

Friends, do you know the God you are dealing with this evening? Do you fear and trust him who alone can forgive our sins and save us forever?

Because what we see here is that God, our creator, cares to save his sinful creatures, whoever we are, ordinary people, people of all faiths and none, even people who bring evil on other people. When Jonah gave up caring about that, well, God found and chased and rescued lost people anyway. Despite Jonah's giving up on God, God did not give up his desire to save his enemies. [31 : 14] Despite Jonah's silence, God spoke. Despite Jonah's death wish, God gave life. God cares to save his enemies, whoever we may be, and nothing can stop him.

Nothing can stop him. If you're not a Christian here, God says to you this evening, call on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

You will be saved. And brothers and sisters, is that not the message that we ourselves take out from here to you, to a world that is lost and far from the Lord?

It's striking that in Israel, this book, the book of Jonah, would be read in its entirety on the most important day of the year, on the day of atonement, when God forgave his people's sins.

And it was read because it speaks so powerfully about our often stubborn hearts, our running from the Lord, our need to be forgiven, and more than that, God's pursuit of us, his relentless pursuit of us in our sin, to find us, and to put us right with him.

[32 : 33] Perhaps as you've listened this evening, you've seen things in your own heart or life that you need to come to God and ask him to forgive, to repent, and to turn over to him.

Do we care for the lost as God cares for the lost? Do we speak God's gracious words to others as he has spoken his gracious words to us?

Do we love and obey God in what he pleases to do, even when it is not what would please us?

Friends, let us respond rightly to him today, turning from our sin and trusting in the God who alone can save.

Let's pray together. God, our Father, we thank you that you are indeed gracious and merciful.

You are slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Father, we pray that you would teach us to love you, not only for all that you have done for us, but for all that you would do and will do and can do, Lord, for a world that is so broken and far from you.

[33 : 52] Father, forgive us, we pray, when we do not love and care for those around us as you do. Father, forgive us, we pray, when we do not share your heart for the lost.

Father, forgive us, we pray, when we turn from you and your plan and your call and your desire for our lives. Forgive us, we pray, when we assert our way and do not bend to your way.

Help us, our Father, we pray, to turn to the Lord Jesus each and every day to lay down our lives, to take up the cross and to follow him in service and love and sacrifice.

we thank you for him. We thank you that he went to the cross for our sins. We thank you that he came to find us when we were lost. We thank you that he has preached peace to us when we were far away.

And we pray that you would keep us in him, for we ask in his great name. Amen.