

JONAH 1:1-2

INTRODUCTION

The story of Jonah is well known, it has been a favourite within Sunday Schools for generations and every child loves the picture of Jonah and the whale (even if the bible doesn't say it was a whale). Some of us might even have been brought up with the song of 'Jonah and the whale.' But the book is not really about Jonah or a great fish (the great fish is only mentioned in 3 verses), but it is basically a story about God and his dealings with individuals and nations.

The book of Jonah is one book of what is known as the Minor Prophets. There are 16 books of prophecy in the Old Testament and 4 of these are referred to as Major Prophets. Books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. The rest of the books are referred to as Minor Prophets. But we need to be careful when we use words like major and minor, we need to be clear by what we mean by these terms.

We are not referring to major and minor in a way that suggests that some books are more important than others, or some are more significant than others, but we use that term to refer to the size of the books. As you can see Jonah is just a small book of only four chapters, whereas Isaiah has 66 chapters.

Now the book of Jonah is different from the other 11 Minor Prophets in that the other books provide the message of the prophet, whereas Jonah provides us with a narrative, a story about God's dealings with Jonah. Now let me make a few more comments about the book and how best to understand it before we launch into the early verses. It seems to me that there are three key verses that sum up the whole book. They are found in 1:9; 4:2; and 4:11, although you could consider v 11 to be the punch line for the whole story.

In 2 kings 14:23-29 we read about the prophet Jonah. He lived during the reign of Jeroboam II who reigned in the Northern Kingdom of Israel from 800 – 751 BC. He came from a place called Amittai, which was 12 miles from lake Galilee and about 3 miles from Nazareth. His ministry as a prophet was successful as he prophesied that Israel would regain some land lost in earlier conflicts and that its borders would be extended again.

Under Jeroboam II his prophecy actually became a reality (2 Kings 14:25). Now I hope you will forgive me for a very long introduction but it is necessary to understand the background of this little book if we are going to ascertain its true meaning.

As I said earlier the book could be summed up in 3 verses and the rest of the verses surrounding these three are a commentary of the truths expressed by them. Let me show you what I mean by taking the first one in 1:9 and applying it to the early verses.

1. GOD IS THE CREATOR AND CONTROLLER OF ALL THINGS (v 9)

Jonah as a Jew knew that God is the creator of everything, he made the sea therefore he controls it, that's why providing a storm and a great fish for Jonah is no problem to God. But He also created and controls the land and therefore his concern for Nineveh should not be unexpected. But let's see what it means for God to be Creator and controller of this world as we look at the opening verses.

a) He sees all that goes on in this world (v 2) – God sees what is going on in Nineveh and it was displeasing to Him. Nineveh was a city in Assyria and of course Assyria was a constant thorn in the flesh for God's people. They were constantly going to war against Israel and were a constant threat to God's people. Although because of internal disputes at this time Assyria was beginning to break up with the power moving from the centre to the many provinces, it was still an enemy to Israel and as we know from later history Assyria actually overpowered and overthrew the Northern Kingdom of Israel so that it no longer existed. When we read that Nineveh was a great city it might actually be referring not just to the walled city but also to the region surrounding it what we might call today greater Nineveh.

Nineveh does not exist today but its remains are just opposite the town of Mosul, which is situated in Northern Iraq. In Jonah's day it was one of the most wicked places in the then known world. Let me read to you Nahum 3:1-4 and although the time scale is approximately a century later, from the evidence we have this is what Nineveh was like in Jonah's time. Such wickedness did not go unnoticed by God in fact it ascended up to him and therefore God was going to act as a result.

But the lesson for us is this one; God sees all that goes on in this world and in our own lives. He takes note of all that happens and is not indifferent to it. He is creator and sovereign over this world therefore nothing is hidden from him nothing escapes his notice. Now if we just apply this to our world today it will bring us great comfort but it will also I believe bring a certain fear into our hearts, perhaps a helpful and reverent fear. As we live with the continuing threat of violence and terrorism today and as we listen day by day to the various atrocities that take place in our world, we would have every right to despair if it was not for the fact that God is creator and sovereign over this world. Events in our world can take many people by surprise, but they do not take God by surprise. He sees every act of evil that is plotted and carried out and he listens to every conversation and he reads everyone's heart.

Wickedness did not escape God's attention. Will the people responsible for the atrocities of our world ever be brought to justice? Well the answer is yes, God sees and notices all that goes on and responds to it. His response is not as we might expect, as we will see as we go through this book, in fact God's response to Nineveh is not what Jonah wants that's why he runs away as we will see. But God's message to Nineveh is clear; He denounces its sin and wickedness (v 2). Their sin spells judgement for Nineveh, unless they repent. It is a comfort to know that one day all the wrongs will be righted in our world, that justice will ultimately be done.

That truth is a great comfort for us, we can leave ultimate and final judgement with God because he sees everything and he knows **all** the wickedness that goes on in this world, we only thankfully know a very small part of all that goes on. But as I

said this truth ought also to create within us a holy fear. If God sees all that goes on in this world then he sees all that goes on in our lives and hearts. He sees the wickedness that may be rooted in us.

Those sins that we think no one knows about God sees, those words that no one else heard, God heard, those thoughts that no one else can read, God reads, those attitudes that we try to hide from others God sees, those actions that we try to cover up, God sees, those sins of omission that we try to justify, God sees. Those times when we convinced ourselves that a certain action was right, God sees its wickedness.

I could go on, it is a fearful thing even as Christians to think that God sees all that goes on in our lives. Yet the same truth that brings fear to us also brings comfort. For even though God sees everything and knows us better than we know ourselves he still offers us forgiveness through Jesus Christ. All who accept his forgiveness He accepts as his children. It's a marvellous truth, we can bring all our sins to God and in true repentance seek his forgiveness, and no matter how wicked we have been we will be forgiven through Jesus Christ.

So as Christians let us remember day by day that God sees everything, that ought to motivate us to work hard when our boss is not watching, it ought to prevent us doing things that displease Him, it ought to make us keep short accounts with God and confess and repent of sins as soon as we realise it. Such a truth will get us out of our beds to come to church, or it will stop us from slipping away in our Christian commitment or it will prevent us from treating others in an unloving and uncaring way.

But let me have a word with any who are not Christians today, who as yet have not sought the Lord's forgiveness in true repentance. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Perhaps we think that we will be good enough for God. Have you ever committed one sin, it doesn't matter what it is, if you have and we all have, then God sees it and as the creator and sovereign God he judges all sin. But there is a way out; God in his grace gives us a way out, a way that involves repentance and forgiveness. Keep reading these sermons on Jonah and we will see more clearly God's graciousness in giving us a way out. But he does it through His word. Which brings me the second implication of God being creator and sovereign over this world.

b) He Sends His Word to Whom He Desires (v 1-2). God interrupts Jonah's life as a prophet in Israel with a message for pagan Nineveh. Verse 2 should read 'arise and go,' it gives the impression that Jonah is now to stop what he is doing and go elsewhere with God's message. You see because God is sovereign over this world he can send his word to whoever he likes.

In this case he sends it to Nineveh, a pagan and wicked city and although the message is one of judgement we ought to rejoice when God's word is proclaimed to the nations of the world. For when God sends a message of judgement he does so, so that he may stir repentance in the hearts of the hearers so that they may turn to God.

When that happens God shows mercy and grace to such repentant sinners. So God's message of judgement is always a message to turn people from sin in repentance so that God can show mercy. We will see next week that this is one reason why Jonah ran away, he knew that taking God's message to pagan Nineveh could lead to Nineveh being saved from God's judgement. That is what our second key verse says (4:2).

God is sovereign and when God wants to save people what does he do? Well he sends his word and he does so through his servants. That is why we are a very privilege nation, yet we fail to realise it. If people only realised it then they would not spurn this opportunity to hear his word and to be saved. His word of judgement to us about hell is not a word that is given out of vindictiveness by God, but it is a word given out of love. We can tell people in a fit of rage 'to go to hell,' but God's message about hell is don't go there please don't go there, repent now and turn to me says God.

Our church is 13 years old that means that God has been gracious to the people of the Dales, he has given our communities his word, he sent his people to live in these villages and towns of the Dales so that Dales people could here his word and repent and be saved. God is able to do that because He is creator and controller of this universe.

That's why he sends missionaries to the far corners of the world he does so, so that people groups can hear His word and so that some out of those people groups will come to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Every time we hear of someone leaving these shores of ours to go as missionaries to somewhere else we ought to rejoice because God wants to save people there. Every time we hear of a new church, which has been formed, we ought to rejoice for God wants people to hear his gospel and be saved. Thank God that His word is being heard in countries like Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and many other Muslim countries. God wants to save Muslims and indeed is doing so.

So how should we respond? We ought to pray that God will raise up men and woman who will go into our world and preach the gospel. We ought to pray for those countries where God's word is not heard, that God as the sovereign Lord of this universe may yet be gracious and bring his word to needy countries and people groups in our world.

You know in the book of Revelation the writer pictures heaven with people from every tribe tongue and nation. How is God going to save people from all those nations and people groups? He will do it by sending his servants with his word with a message of grace and judgement so that sinners will turn from their sin and be saved by God's marvellous grace.

Nothing can stop God from fulfilling his purpose in this world, people from every tribe tongue and nation will be saved because he is creator and sovereign controller of this universe and He is also gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (4:2).

Amen