

The Barrier: Disregarding the God of mercy

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[0 : 00] Let us pray as we begin. Heavenly Father, I pray that I will be your faithful servant and that I will speak in accordance with your word.

And I pray that your word will go out and achieve what it is meant to achieve and that it will point back to you, our great God and Saviour. I pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now, what do we do when God doesn't act the way we want? You see, when God acts in line with my preferences, it's easy to worship and to serve him, isn't it?

We love it when God seems to be fulfilling our wishes and protecting us from all the difficult people and situations in our lives. But what happens when God doesn't act the way we would like?

Then we have a choice. We can either choose to follow the real God, even if he doesn't fit my neat, tidy box of what I think he should do.

[1 : 05] Or we can try to flee from him and search for a God who better fits our preferences. Which option is better?

Well, that is the question the book of Jonah poses to us today. You see, what is the book of Jonah really all about? Today, if I said, Jonah and the...

And I pause here, how will you complete the sentence? That's right, fish. Right? Not a whale. It's actually a fish. And that is what instantly comes to mind whenever we think of this book.

And because that image of a big fish swallowing up Jonah so dominates our imaginations, sometimes we fail to see the bigger picture.

But the truth is, the book of Jonah is about so much more than just a fishy miracle. So, and my hope is that after these four weeks are over, when I ask you to fill in the blank, instead of saying Jonah and the fish, what comes to mind instead will be Jonah and his God.

[2 : 19] The real God. Our God. Because really, that's what the book is all about. This is a book about Jonah and his God.

And so this is a book about us and our God. So let me introduce you to these two main characters. Let me introduce you, first of all, to Jonah.

Look at 1 verse 1. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Now, if you've read your Old Testament, this will sound familiar.

Every time God calls a prophet, this is exactly what it will say. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. The word of the Lord came to Zechariah.

The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel. And now, the word of the Lord came to Jonah. So the first thing we discover is that Jonah is a proper prophet.

[3 : 20] Now, that is important. You see, if you are someone who is already familiar with this story, Jonah can seem like a joke, can't he?

I mean, all throughout this book, he's either running, snoring, getting eaten by a fish, or being Mr. Angry and sulking.

So he can seem like a one-dimensional cartoon character. When you compare him with someone like, say, Elijah, you could very well find yourself shaking your head and saying, this guy is a prophet, ah?

Jonah, seriously? But it is true. Jonah is a proper prophet. This is made even clearer from our first Bible reading from today, 2 Kings 14, verse 23 to 29.

If we look down at verse 25, we are told he is a faithful public servant of God who takes his job of speaking the word of God seriously.

[4 : 25] Clearly, he is no joke figure. No one in Israel would have thought that. On the contrary, he would have been well respected. For secondly, not only is he a proper prophet, he is a successful prophet.

Look again at verse 25. What is the kingdom like at that point? Well, under King Jeroboam II, they seem to have done very well.

Indeed, they have expanded their borders. In fact, this is the most territory they have controlled since the golden age of King Solomon.

It is even beginning to resemble Eden's borders. And indeed, verses 23 and 28, elsewhere in the passage, will show us that Jeroboam had a long and prosperous reign, 41 years in all, in which he enjoyed many military victories over his enemies.

And here is the thing. Who is the king's spiritual director at that time? It's Jonah. He seems to have been part of the king's inner circle, speaking God's word to him, bringing direction, and helping him achieve great things.

[5 : 52] Imagine being Jonah and having the satisfaction of seeing the nation blessed by God through your ministry to the king.

How gratifying it must have been to be hailed as a success, as he must have been. And as a result, thirdly, he is a patriotic prophet.

You would have found him enthusiastically wearing his Make Israel Great Again t-shirt and cap. Because is this not precisely what he has just done?

Has he not just played a major role in making God's chosen nation prominent again? How deep must his sense of national pride be seeing Israel's current state?

He is a patriotic prophet. But what do we do when God doesn't act the way we want?

[7 : 01] What happens if and when God suddenly says things we don't like? That's the question Jonah now has to confront. In 1 verse 2, God commands him, go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me.

So what does this proper, successful, patriotic prophet do? He runs away. By God, I'm out of here. And that is unprecedented. Yes, there have been other prophets who have argued with God and been reluctant to do what he says. Think of Moses, for instance.

But none of them ran until Jonah. So why? Why does Jonah flee?

Why does he dislike this command so much? Well, could it be because Nineveh isn't exactly in your top ten list of tourist places to go?

[8 : 14] Yes, Nineveh was one of the great cities of the Assyrian Empire. Shortly after Jonah's time, in fact, it would become its capital.

But it was also a wicked place. A violent place. You see, Assyria is the kind of evil empire where they impale prisoners of war and they put them on display, stick a spear through them.

It's the kind of place where they pull out your tongues and burn you while you are still alive. And this empire has been a thorn in Israel's flesh for a long time.

So could this be why Jonah is reluctant? After all, if he goes, he might never come back. Well, maybe there's a little bit of that.

But actually, that is not the main reason Jonah runs. Rather, it is because Jonah knows who our God is.

[9 : 24] Let me now introduce the other main character in this book. God. And Jonah knows, without a doubt, his God is a God of mercy.

You see, Jonah is not blind. He knows, 2 Kings 14, verse 24, that Jeroboam did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, that is his great-great-great-great-grandfather, which he had caused Israel to commit.

So there is absolutely no reason why Israel should be enjoying blessing and prosperity from the hand of the Lord.

They deserve judgment instead. No, the only reason Israel is doing so well at the moment is because God is being gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love.

And Jonah knows that. His God is a God of mercy. So when Jonah is asked to bring the word of the Lord, not just to Israel, but to the Ninevites, he can't help but have a sneaking suspicion.

[10 : 51] Yes, he is to deliver a message of judgment, but could it be that God wants to show mercy to Nineveh the way he did to Israel?

After all, if God really wanted to judge them, he could just do so without bothering to send them any warning. But what if God is sending him to deliver this message precisely so that they will repent?

What if he actually succeeds? What if prosperity is what God wants for his enemies? Those are the unspoken questions on Jonah's mind, ones that he will eventually voice out in chapter 4.

And that's what he can't accept. It's not a problem for him if God chooses to be merciful to Israel. I mean, that's great, isn't it? But it is a big problem.

If God is merciful to his enemies. It's thoroughly offensive to Jonah. So he runs.

[12:05] But I think there is also a second and more subtle reason. Why is Jonah so resistant?

Again, because he knows he's God all too well. And he knows God is not just a God of mercy, but a God of justice as well. Jonah is slow to anger.

He is slow to anger, yes, but that doesn't mean he never gets righteously angry. You see, Jonah knows his history.

This is not the first time a prophet has been asked to minister to the Gentiles. Back in 2 Kings chapter 8, one of Jonah's predecessors, Elisha, was asked to give the word of the Lord to another one of Israel's enemies, an individual called Hazael, and to anoint him as the king of Aram.

But as he does so, Elisha weeps. Why? Because he knows what blessing this Gentile means.

[13:17] He knows that God is going to use Aram to judge his own unrepentant people. And that is exactly what happens in 2 Kings chapter 13, verse 22.

We read this. Hazael, king of Aram, oppressed Israel throughout the reign of Jehovah has. That's Jeroboam's predecessor. No wonder Elisha's message brought him such grief.

And Jonah, remembering Elisha, could very well have wondered, could this pattern be about to repeat itself?

Remember, his boss, king Jeroboam, has yet to repent. So could God be preserving the Gentile nation of Assyria to act as his instrument of judgment against his own people?

And actually, history will prove Jonah's suspicions right. His fellow prophet, Amos, not long after this, not long after this, will prophesy the downfall of Israel at the hands of Assyria because of their sin.

[14:39] And that is exactly what happens decades later. So put yourself in Jonah's shoes. For years and years, you have seen your ministry result in the restoration of your beloved country.

ministry. But now, by going to the Assyrians, you risk seeing all the work of your ministry coming undone.

You are definitely no longer making Israel great again. Perhaps your own people will even remember you ministered to these hated enemies and will call you traitor prophet.

So what do we do when God doesn't act the way we want and ask us to do things we rather not?

We can either flee or follow God and Jonah thinks he knows which option is best.

He runs. Three times in verse 3, we are told he's headed for Tarshish. Now, we don't know much about Tarshish, but we do know this.

[15:53] While Nineveh lies in the east, Tarshish lies in the west. In fact, the westernmost part of the Mediterranean world.

It is the exact opposite direction to Nineveh. So clearly, Jonah is trying to get as far away from God as he can.

Basically, he's trying to tell God this is your plan, God. I don't want to be part of your gang. I don't want to be a prophet anymore.

I don't want to hear from you or speak your word anymore. I'm resigning my vocation. I'll go to a distant land. And you can call or email or WhatsApp me all you like, but I am not picking up or answering your messages.

Yes. Yes.

[16:56] Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. your prejudices. Perhaps you're called to love or care for someone you'd rather not love or care for.

A difficult boss, a needy acquaintance, a problematic family member. Perhaps you've invested hugely in something, something that's made you a success in the eyes of others, but God is calling you to sacrifice all that for him.

Turn down an opportunity at work, maybe, for an opportunity at ministry. Then you would rather not. You would rather run, you would rather hide.

You might still come to church, yes, but the moment God's word touches on that rather sensitive area of your life, you quickly press the mute button.

[18:12] You spiritually shut your ears. You make sure he can't get through to you. That is where Jonah was. He is so determined to get away from God, he is even willing to head to the sea.

You must remember Jonah is a Jew, and Jews don't like the sea at all. The sea for them is a dark and mysterious place full of scary sea creatures.

It is a symbol of chaos, of anti-God forces. It is out of control. But Jonah thinks that at this point, being at sea is a better option than being before the Lord.

It's better than listening to God. It is better than following God. And could it be? Because God doesn't always act in the way we would like.

We would sometimes rather run to the place of chaos, and uncertainty, and darkness, rather than to the source of life, and love, simply because we are convinced obeying God's word is not for our good?

[19:32] Could it be that we rather keep ourselves enslaved to bitterness, or jealousy, or lust, or some other sin, even though it is a miserable experience, simply because we have persuaded ourselves that it is at least better than doing what God wants?

That's what Jonah has done. He's persuaded himself running is the best option. He would rather risk death than face God. But here's what we're going to find out.

Running is futile because nothing can escape God's control. We can run, we can refuse God, but God is always a step ahead of us.

But at the same time, here is the good news. No one is beyond God's compassion. Even when we refuse God, God refuses to let go of us.

And that's what the rest of Jonah chapter 1 is going to show us. So let us keep reading to see these two truths about the real God. So firstly, nothing can escape God's control.

[20:49] Now, have you ever played with young kids? You know, sometimes they might declare, oh, I'm going to run so far away that you can never find me. And then they simply run from one end of the living room to the other.

And then you just have to laugh and play along. And I can't help but think that verses 3 and 4 is a bit like that. Jonah makes such a big show in verse 3 of escaping God.

Going to Joppa, paying the fare, getting on a ship. But verse 4 very casually starts with, then the Lord. It is as if Jonah only made it to the other end of the room and God is just watching him with amusement.

And that is because the whole universe is God's living room. He sees everything. He's always there. In fact, it is all under his control. And that's what chapter 1 keeps showing us over and over again.

So for instance, is the scary, chaotic sea beyond God's control? Not a chance. Look at verse 4.

[22:01] Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. In no time at all, God stirs up a storm.

This storm is so great that even the experienced sailors are terrified. So what do they do? They try to regain control. First off, they try praying to their own gods, verse 5.

But their cries are useless because their own gods, of course, aren't the ones in control. And so they try something practical. In response to God throwing the storm at them, verse 5, why don't they try throwing the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship?

But of course, that doesn't work either. This is God's storm. Nature obeys him because he is their maker and the ship will keep tossing about as long as he says so.

So the sea is under God's control. But what about the little things? Are even those under God's control? Definitely. Look at verse 7. When the sailors saw that this was no ordinary storm, they said, let us cast lots to see who is responsible for this calamity.

[23:25] And as they do so, Proverbs 16, verse 33 is proven true. The Lord is cast into the lap, but his every decision is from the Lord.

The Lord points to Jonah as it should as the culprit. God made sure it was so. He is in control.

He is, as Jonah will declare in chapter 1, verse 9, Yahweh, the Lord, the God of heaven. He alone is supreme.

And he is the one sovereign over the sea and the dry land. In other words, he is your only hope in the storms because he is the only one truly in control.

You can try to take control as the sailors tried to do. Later on in verses 11 and 12 when they hear Jonah's proposed solution, throw him overboard, they understandably are reluctant to do so.

[24 : 31] Could sending this guy to his death be the only way out? So once again, they try to control the situation themselves. Verse 13, they try to roll out of the storm to dry land.

But because God is the God of both the sea and the dry land, it is not a problem for God to make the sea grow wilder and wilder than before.

Verse 13, to prevent them from reaching the dry land that he also rules over. And so, not only Jonah, but even the sailors acknowledge nothing can escape God's control.

Look at what they say in the second half of verse 14. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you please.

They've tried all sorts of things. Calling on other gods, lightening the ship, asking Jonah to pray in verse 6, casting lots, interrogating Jonah in verse 8, and rowing.

[25 : 44] But in the end, they know they have no control, God can do as he pleases, and they can only cast themselves on him.

So let that sink in. Nothing can escape God's control. Do you believe that? When you look at the world, it can seem like the anti-God forces are powerfully in control, aren't they?

whether it is natural disasters or human wickedness, sometimes it can look very much like those things have the upper hand. But that has never ever been true.

So if that is what is making you anxious today, don't despair. Yes, life can become very uncomfortable. Yes, there is so much you can control.

control. But the important thing is God is in control. But what if today you are hearing this as someone who is running away from God in some area of your life?

[27 : 01] Perhaps you think that by making sure you have little contact with God's word or God's people, or if you can just preoccupy yourself with whatever the world offers, you can avoid his grasp.

But again, that has never ever been true. It is actually impossible to evade him. God is there, not just in church, but in your workplace when you are gossiping about others, or at the bar, when you are getting drunk, or on the world wide web, when you are clicking on stuff you shouldn't.

And sometimes, God might very well send a storm with your sin, just to remind you who is in charge. Indeed, the pastor Tim Keller even goes so far as to say, all sin has a mighty storm attached to it.

What he means is this, while every difficulty in life isn't always the result of sin, every sin eventually brings you difficulty.

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[28 : 30] God's love towards you. God might orchestrate things in such a way so that you can see that all other options are a dead end.

And your only hope is actually not to run from him, but to run to him, the God of heaven, the sovereign creator, the one true God.

God is actually good news because don't forget, secondly, nothing is beyond God's compassion.

You see, it's not just God's control, but God's compassion that is also highlighted throughout chapter 1. And I think the best way to see that is to contrast God with his prophet.

come back with me to verses 4 and 5 for a moment. The moment the great storm hits and the sailors are terrified, what does Jonah do?

[29 : 33] Oh, he is cut to the heart. He starts telling them about God. He tries to help out. Oh, wait. Sorry. Wrong story. No, he doesn't do any of that at all.

Instead, verse 5, he is completely indifferent. He is a prophet, but he is literally sleeping on the job. And the sailors are absolutely dumbfounded.

In verse 6, they say to him, Arise, cry out to your God. So they are making a desperate prayer request. But does Jonah even bother to do that?

No, he is too self-pitying at this point. He lacks compassion for these sailors, to the point he doesn't even pray for them. Why should he? He didn't care for the Ninevites, and he certainly doesn't care for these sailors.

His running from God has not only impacted himself, but those around him. But that doesn't stop him from sleeping soundly while the sailors are suffering.

[30 : 46] In fact, did you notice that even after the sailors woke him up, he didn't initially own up to being the guy at fault? He has no compassion whatsoever. But thank the Lord, that doesn't stop God from showing his heart of compassion to these sailors.

You see, although Jonah refuses to make God known to these Gentiles, God is not at all reluctant to open. And so verse 7, he makes sure, first of all, to expose Jonah through the throwing of the lots, so that the sailors will ask him all those questions.

And so the prophet who is so reluctant to open his mouth has to answer. And then notice, what does Jonah do in verse 9? He does precisely what he has been trying so hard to avoid.

he testifies about God to the hated Gentiles. He tells them who the one true God is.

You could say he's sharing the gospel, even if that is not his intention. You see, God wants people everywhere to know him, and he's not going to let even a resistant prophet stop him.

[32 : 04] His word will still go where it's meant to go. It will reach unreached people, even through the words of a prophet on the run. And that word begins to bear fruit.

Notice by verse 14, the sailors are no longer talking to their pagan gods, but to Jonah's God. And when they plead for his mercy, for the desperate action that they're about to undertake, throw Jonah overboard, what does God do?

exactly as they requested, he shows mercy to them, he calms the storm. He has revealed himself to be the sovereign and compassionate God, the true God, and now he invites them to respond to him.

No one is beyond God's compassion, not even pagan sailors in a far away land who have never heard of him before. And as we'll see next week, not even a stubborn prophet running away from him is beyond God's compassion.

So what do we do when God doesn't act the way we want? What happens when God calls on us to do what we don't like? the first option is to refuse God, to run away from him, to resist him.

[33 : 33] That's the option. Jonah tried, but I hope by now you see that it's a stupid thing to do. Jonah 1 shows us that. So what's the alternative?

Well, Jonah 1 also shows us, fear him instead. Don't flee, but fear him instead. Did you notice that there's also another key theme that consistently comes up in the passage with regards to both Jonah and the sailors?

Let me show you where that word fear appears. In verse 5, in the face of the storm, the sailors are terrified or literally fearful.

And then verse 9, we have Jonah declaring he worships the Lord and the word worship there again is really the Hebrew word for fear.

And then in verse 10, the sailors get more terrified as they realise they're dealing with a God that they do not know. And in the Hebrew, it actually says they feared with a great fear.

[34 : 43] They're really scared. And then it comes up again in verse 16 where they greatly fear the Lord after he saves them. So let us think about what the fear of God is and how both Jonah and the sailors fear the Lord.

What does it mean to fear God? It means to revere him, to submit to him, to be in awe before him and to live as if God is really God.

And so to fear God would involve obeying and surrendering our lives to him even when we are not sure what he's up to. That's what it means to fear God.

Now let us have a look at Jonah. He says he fears God, doesn't he? And certainly his theology is perfectly sound. Everything he says about God is true.

But just because he knows and speaks the truth, doesn't mean he fears God. Has anything he's done so far shown that he truly does so?

[35 : 51] after all when God speaks, he doesn't tremble, he just says bye bye. When God sends a storm, he takes a nap.

Later on in chapter 4 when God speaks again, he just sulks. He says he fears God, but this is not a God fearing man.

And actually back in verse 9, did you notice how he first identifies himself, even before he mentions his supposed fear of God? I am a Hebrew.

That is what he takes pride in. His ethnic identity, his nationality, not his faith. And really in that sense, Jonah is probably representative of what Israel as a whole under King Jeroboam was like.

They were too busy being proud in their status as the chosen ones to truly fear God. And Jonah can also be representative of us, can't he?

[37 : 03] Isn't it easy for us to say the right words, have the right theology, but not truly fear God and give our lives to him? Isn't it easy for us to take pride in being the righteous Christians of

Sarawak?

And not like those racist orang malaya over there, or like those liberal westerners even further away, or whatever other group that we want to compare ourselves to.

Yet our lack of action and compassion betrays where our heart truly lies. Scary thing is we can be completely blind to our lack of the fear of the Lord.

Jonah certainly doesn't seem to be self-aware of how much his words in verse 9 and his current actions don't match up. But what about the sailors?

Remember who they are. They're outsiders, they worship other gods, but in verses 5 and 6, they are the ones reminding Jonah to pray to the one true God.

[38 : 13] In fact, as we saw earlier, they are more ready to call on Yahweh than Jonah is. And when they hear Jonah testify to Yahweh in verse 9, they are rightly terrified.

Verse 10, how can Jonah be so casual about what he's done? It is the sailors who rightly tremble before God and are in awe of him.

And notice, as they begin to grow in their fear of God, how they begin doing the right things. Did you notice how even though Jonah had no compassion on these sailors, the sailors had compassion on him?

They try everything in their power to avoid throwing him overboard. And when that finally becomes their only option, they don't presume.

They make sure that they tell God first. every step of the way they fear God, so much so that by verse 16, they do what Jonah still refuses to do by the end of this chapter.

[39 : 21] They make sacrifices and vows to him. So do you truly fear God? That is the big question by the time we get to the end of chapter one.

Do our actions match our words? You know, Jonah had so many privileges. He received the word of the Lord. He stood before the Lord in his presence.

He lived in a land blessed by God. And so do we, especially in Sarawak, where we still enjoy relative freedom of religion to come to church, to have access to Bibles.

But do we take all that for granted and disregard God whenever he speaks to us? And do we therefore disregard our neighbors, preferring to take pride in how much better we are than them, rather than telling them of the same mercy we ourselves have received?

Let us take stock, let us turn to God, run to God, and as we do so, let us remember who our God is. for we see even clearer than Jonah how sovereign and compassionate God is.

[40 : 41] For when we turn to the New Testament, we come across this little episode recorded for us in Mark 4, verse 35-41. We find some of Jesus' disciples out on the waters in a boat.

And we find, just like Jonah 1, a great storm. And we find the terrified disciples, unable to roll back to dry land, seeking out Jesus, only to find him fast asleep, just like Jonah.

And like the sailors, they cry out, don't you care? But this is where Jesus is different to Jonah. He does care, and he can do something about it.

He gets up, and with a word, he calms the storm before turning to his disciples and telling them, do not fear.

Do not have faith. And the disciples grow even more fearful. But paradoxically, that is the right response, the faithful response.

[41 : 57] Because now they are no longer fearing the storm, but fearing the Lord. So my brothers and sisters, if we are trusting in Christ, we know the one who controls all things, and is all compassionate.

Today, shall we not fear him? Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, thank you for your word from Jonah 1. And we pray that we would take heed. Help us, Lord, to not take you for granted, the God of the heavens and the earth, the God of the sea and the dry land, the one who is in control.

But let us also take refuge in that, knowing that you are the God who is compassionate to us, who has rescued us when we were still your enemies, running away from you, through Jesus on the cross.

Lord, help us to obey you, fear you, walk with you, submit to you. We pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.