

Trembling at God's Word

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Date: 05 July 2026

Preacher: Roy Davidson

[0:00] And today we look at the whole book of Jonah ever so briefly.! It's not quite our usual practice. We're considering hearing God's word, a bit of a series on hearing God's word. As we learned last week, there are three key things to remember when we come to God's word.

That is, what do we learn about God when we look at God's word? How he made wise for salvation? And then how we actually are equipped to live lives to please God as we come to his word.

So those three things will shape our conclusion this morning. But let's skip through the book fairly quickly. Chapter 1 set the scene for us, didn't it? The play did it so well. But have a look at the text in front of you there.

You've got hopefully a Bible there, Jonah. Chapter 1, verses 1 to 3, we'll look at right away. We see the Lord. God, Yahweh, the Lord speaks to Jonah.

Get up, go and preach to Nineveh. Or against Nineveh. Now it's not just any God. It's the Lord God. Which is important to remember as we get sailing through the book of Jonah.

[1:09] For we see that the sailors also have gods there in verse 5. And there's a progression from the sailors fearing their gods to actually fearing the Lord God.

In verse 16 of chapter 1. In fact, fear is a theme which actually develops through chapter 1. And Nineveh is the city he's told to go to.

It's a particular city, not just any city, Nineveh. But did you notice how it's described as the wicked city, verse 2. We know a fair bit about Nineveh from the Bible and from other sources.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, that is northern Iraq. And the Assyrians were the ancient enemies of Israel. In 722 BC, the Assyrians carted off the 10 northern tribes of Israel to captivity. And then they were the world's superpower at the time, like America is today. And they were skilled in warfare, trained in warfare from their youth.

[2:14] They were experts at it. And their name was synonymous with cruelty. Regularly, after a battle, people were selected for torture. Heads moved, removed, hands cut off, tongues pulled out, ears cut off, eyes gouged out.

And skins skinned off some and put on the walls of buildings as a warning. It seemed like there was no brutality known to man that the people of Nineveh hadn't actually done.

That was the practice of the Assyrians. That was the practice of Nineveh. Now Israel's 10 northern tribes were conquered by them. So the Assyrians were wicked people.

And Nineveh was the capital, the centre, the epicentre of a wicked nation. The epicentre of wickedness. And God knows about their wickedness.

They're a great nation, but a great nation destined for destruction. As the prophets Nahum and Zephaniah, you can read them yourself, said would happen to them.

[3:21] But the Lord wants Jonah to go and preach against them and pronounce judgment upon them. That's what he says there in verse 2. Jonah rose and said, go and their time has come.

Their evil's come up before him. Now it's one thing to pronounce judgment from a distance. Right? You guys over there.

Right? Bad for you. Right? It's another thing to actually venture into the midst of the people. Into the midst of the hornet's nest.

And tell them, God's against you. Not the kind of place that I'd like to go in a hurry. I don't know if you'd like to go there either. Would you like the job of going and telling them that the God of the Hebrews was angry with them, knowing the way that they had treated the Hebrews already?

Knowing what they were like. Knowing what they had done to other nations. What they had done to the ten tribes of Israel already. So, Jonah doesn't get up and go to Nineveh.

[4:26] And here's the first twist in the tale. Right? Unlike all the other prophets, right? He doesn't take up the job. Instead, he runs away.

He's the prodigal prophet. He goes down to Joppa. Joppa. Here's a bit of a map for you here. So, Joppa's on the coast. And then instead of going to Nineveh, which is over there, he goes to Joppa. I've got this back to front of my own head. He goes to Tarshish over there, which is over in Spain. You can't get much further away from Nineveh than go that way. Totally opposite direction. Instead of heading east, he heads west. Away from the presence of the Lord. That's the first part of the story there. And do you blame him?

I mean, would you like to walk up to Vladimir Putin, right, and tell him God's against you? Would you want to go up to the most powerful and vicious nation of the day and call them out for their wickedness and expect to live?

[5:35] Not in your nelly, says Jonah. I'm going the other direction. I'm out of here. I'm going to go to Tarshish. I'm going to hide out there for a while. Now, it's important to notice here that God holds people accountable for their wickedness.

He knows what the nations of the world are like, and he knows what people are like. But he's not in a hurry to wipe them out. He's slow to anger.

But we know that the word of God is living and active, and nothing in all creation is actually hidden from his sight. Everything is uncovered before his eyes to him, to whom he must give an account. And God knows the wickedness of Nineveh. And just as God knew the wickedness of Nineveh, so he knows the wickedness of modern-day society in the West as well. Our decadent immorality, our greed, our materialism, our injustice, our oppression of the poor, our vice, our corruption, our murder of the unborn, our exploitation of the vulnerable, the epistemological arrogance, our hedonism.

And he knows the wickedness of the East and the Middle East as well, the atrocities of ISIS, the idolatry of Hinduism, Buddhism, where people have turned from the true and living God and worshipped the creation rather than the Creator.

[7:04] God knows the wickedness of the nations. And when Jonah hears God's word, he doesn't tremble at it though, does he? He rejects it. Jonah is the prodigal prophet who tries to run away from the clear word of God.

But Jonah doesn't take the true and living God into account, does he? The Lord God will not be thwarted. He'll bring about his plans and purposes.

There is no defying God. So the storm comes. And this is some storm. Terrifying. One that's life-threatening.

The sailors tell the sleeping Jonah to arise, get up, just as God had said to him, arise and go. It would have been a shock to hear the same words from the captain of the ship as the Lord God had already given to Jonah.

And the amazing thing is that the captain tells him to call upon his God. Give a thought so we won't not perish there in verse 6.

[8:14] Arise, you sleeper. Call out to your God. Perhaps the God will give a thought to us that we may not perish. And while Jonah would rather die than pray to God and calm the storm, they cast lots.

Jonah is the one who is terrified and identified as the reason for the peril they face, the evil they face, the death they face. Jonah claims to be a Hebrew, one of God's chosen people, one who is one of God's friends.

But he's actually faithless and rebellious. He's theologically correct, right? Theologically correct, worshipping the true and living God, the God of heaven and earth, who created the sea and the dry land, verse 9.

And this only makes the sailors more exceedingly afraid. Did you hear that phrase over and over again in this book? Exceedingly afraid. What can they do to proclaim the Lord of the heaven and earth? Jonah says, throw me overboard and it will be calm with the cargo. They're reluctant to do that, but eventually the things get worse as they do. And the sailors call out to the Lord, verse 14. O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life and lay not on us in innocent blood.

[9:36] For you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you. The sailors feared God, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

And they throw Jonah overboard, verse 15. And the sea becomes calm, becomes flat. Their lives have been spared. The sailors feared the Lord. Notice exceedingly, verse 16.

See verse 16 there? Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. Meanwhile, Jonah's swallowed by a big fish.

Well, he prays to the fish there in chapter 2 and then he's vomited out on dry land and the giant fish is sick of him in his belly and can't get him out fast enough and vomits him out.

Which then brings us to chapter 3 and we see some powerful preaching. As we come to chapter 3, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time.

[10:40] Jonah is told to go to Nineveh. Chapter 3, verse 1. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the messages I tell you.

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. Three days journey in breadth.

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey, and he called out, Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Here is one of the shortest sermons and most effective sermons you'll ever hear.

Eight words. Yet 40 days Nineveh shall be overthrown. Nineveh was a great city of God.

We know from archaeology that it was 25 kilometres long by 15 kilometres wide. Think about that for a minute with me. That is from Chapel Hill to the bay wide, right, and from Everton Park to Rock Lee long.

[11:55] Or the other way around. Long, Chapel Hill to, you know. That's a big city. That's a big place.

A big visit required, well, a visit took three days. One day to get in from the suburbs to the CBD, walk from Pullen Vale to the CBD of Brisbane, maybe, and then walk home after having done your business for a day there.

Proclaiming your message all the way. Nineveh is a major city, but not just in its own eyes, but in God's own eyes. Literally, it's a large city to God.

And God spoke to Nineveh through Jonah 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. And you see the response. Ignore Jonah?

Kill Jonah? Laugh at Jonah? Jonah? No. They believed Jonah. Well, did they believe Jonah? What does verse 5 say, chapter 3?

[13:04] And the people didn't have believed God. They heard God's word and believed it. Their belief is immediate from the greatest of them to the least.

And when the king hears the news, he too believes. In fact, he gets off his throne and sits in the dust, humbling himself before God, trembling before God's word.

And the king then leads the nation in repentance. Here's one of the most shortest sermons and most effective sermons you'll ever hear.

Eight words and 120,000 people believed it. Or verse 6 to 9. The word reached the king of Nineveh and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.

And he issued a proclamation and published throughout Nineveh. By the decree of the king and his nobles, let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth and let them call out mightily to God.

[14:17] Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that's in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.

Here is national mourning, fasting, no eating, no drinking, sitting in sackcloth. There is national repentance turning from evil ways, from violence and there's a cry for mercy, not presuming upon it, but begging God to be merciful.

Maybe, perhaps, God might turn and relent from his fierce anger. so we may not perish. Who knows? God might not destroy us.

God may have pity and the only thing they can hope for is God's mercy. They can't demand it. They can only beg it and God does there in verse 10.

When God saw all that they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them and he did not do it.

[15:24] God responds with mercy. This part of God's word creates so much for us to consider that we can't really do justice to it this morning. But notice the contrast in response to God's word.

Jonah heard it but didn't heed it. the sailors heard it and believed it. Jonah then went and preached it reluctantly I'm sure but the inhabitants of the great wicked city heard it for what it was not as Jonah's words but as God's words and there's a great repentance from the greatest to the least of the people.

They heard God's word, feared God's word, trembled at God's word and repented from the wickedness and God repented from his intended judgment upon them.

Now the rest of Jonah chapter 4 goes to show the dark heart of Jonah who was upset by God's mercy, who despised God's mercy and sulked. He would rather have seen Nineveh destroyed 120,000 people wiped out then saved.

But let's think about this a little bit more, a bit more deeply, right? On October the 7th, 2023, Hamas attacked southern Israel. 1,195 men, women and children were killed and around 250 of them were taken as hostage back into Gaza.

[16 : 55] It was the first large-scale attack on Israel since the Arab War of 1948. This then led to the retaliation of Israel which led to the war in Gaza which we've seen played out on the TV before us, before our very eyes.

Now I'm not going to comment about the war, who's right, who's wrong or what might be right and what might be wrong but I want you just to feel one thing, right? I want you to feel this one thing. If you were a Jew and God was to have told you, a Jew, right, to go and warn the people who live in Gaza that they're about to face the great wrath of God, how would you feel?

Would you do it? It wouldn't be easy. I'd be fearing for my life. And how would you feel if they recognised their wickedness, repented of their wickedness and cast themselves upon God's mercy and he didn't wipe them out?

Where would the justice be? How could that possibly be right? So you can understand how Jonah felt. After all, it was the Assyrians who wiped out his people, committed atrocities and barbarous atrocities at that.

[18 : 28] They were like the Hamas of the day, violent murderers of the Jews. So then, what do we learn about God?

What do we learn about salvation? And what do we learn about living as his people? What do we learn about God? Well, there's lots, isn't there? God sees the wickedness of the world.

God knows what's going on in the world. Nothing escapes his attention. And there is such a thing as wickedness. Wickedness on a national scale carried out by the wickedness of the citizens of the nation.

and God will not let wickedness go unpunished. And yet he warns wicked people that punishment is coming and sends his word through his prophets that it's coming as a warning.

We learn that God doesn't delight in judgment. It's not what gets him out of bed in the morning. He's not looking forward to what must be done. He would much rather people repent and return to him and turn from their wicked ways and live.

[19 : 44] That's what he'd prefer. He cares for the millions and billions of people in the world. You may have thought that's not the case but if you did then that would not be good representation of God.

You'd be getting him wrong. God may relent we learn as well. God may relent. It's possible for God to relent from the wrath that he intends to bring if people will repent at the hearing of his word turning from the evil ways.

God might turn from his fierce anger. In fact Jonah had it right. The memory verse is exactly right. Chapter 4 verse 2 God is gracious and merciful slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

That's the character of our God. Which then leads us to consider what do we learn about salvation? Well salvation belongs to the Lord.

It's his to give as he wills. He can give it or he can withhold it. But salvation is linked to the response that someone has to hearing his word.

[21 : 10] Believing it. Fearing it. Trembling at God's word. And here's the big one though. Salvation is available to all who believe from the greatest to the least.

From the vilest offender, from the most evil people, violent, wicked people, the ancient Assyrian, and if the ancient Assyrian, then the modern day murderer.

Salvation is available for all who will believe. In fact, salvation is only available for those who believe. National identity won't cut it.

Simply being a Hebrew would not cut it for Jonah and being an upright citizen, ignoring God and going about your life without him will not cut it with God today. It's not just that we know that there is a God in heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

Knowing that intellectually is not the point. It's rightly fearing God who made the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land that matters. Those who hear God's word, tremble at it and believe.

[22 : 29] Those who heed God's word can be saved. And salvation requires God to relent of sending his judgment which leads us to the cross because you can see the problem, can't you?

If you haven't yet, let me spell it out to you. How can God be just and right and let wicked ones go without the punishment they deserve for their wickedness?

Put simply, he can't be righteous, can he, in letting guilty people go free? It's not fair. It's not just. It's not right. There's no way that we can give anything in exchange for the death we deserve due to living a life ignoring God all our lives.

God did not forgive the Assyrian for their wickedness. Well, it's at the cross where justice and mercy meets, where God the Father's just and righteous wrath comes upon God the righteous Son so that the wicked can be forgiven.

[23 : 49] God did not spare his only Son, did not relent in sending his righteous wrath upon him so that I could be forgiven, so that we could be forgiven, so that the Assyrian could be forgiven.

Which is what Romans chapter 3 teaches us. Come to Romans chapter 3, it might be on the screen behind me, I'm not quite sure, but Romans chapter 3 and we're almost done. Romans chapter 3 verse 21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifest apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe, for there's no distinction for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified, that is made right with God by his grace as a gift through the redemption that's in Christ Jesus.

Now look at these next couple of verses, verse 25 and 26, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

It was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

[25 : 55] So Jesus is put forward as the propitiation, that is the one who takes the wrath of God by his sacrifice, that's what propitiation means, God's wrath comes upon, turns upon him and you receive the salvation by trusting in what God has done with his son and that shows God's justice, his righteousness in sparing me when I deserve my own wrath, God's wrath because it goes upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

that's how God's justice is maintained and that he can be just in letting the guilty go free.

And the thing is this is now not just a maybe, right, this is now a promise. Those who fear God's word, trust in his son, the promise is you will be saved.

All right, and what do we learn about living as God's people? Well, it's a blessing to hear God's word of warning in his coming wrath, isn't it? We're now in a much better place than the people of Nineveh because of God's mercy.

His promise is that those who tremble at his word, who repent and worship him as Lord, will be saved from his wrath now that his son has come and enjoy life forever in the kingdom as his dearly beloved children.

[27 : 40] We're shown how ugly it is, haven't we been, how ugly it is for anyone to begrudge God's mercy on anyone. God's petulant prophet models the very opposite of what it means to be one of God's people.

There's no place for self-righteousness. We are shown how powerful God's word is. An eight word sermon from a reluctant preacher brought about the repentance of 120,000 people.

God worked through his word and promised to keep doing so. And God has promised that his righteous wrath is still to come, but he's delayed in bringing it, that all may hear and tremble at his word, repent and receive God's mercy, receive forgiveness, receive life, receive salvation.

But just as he did to that generation of Nineveh, eventually, however, God did bring Nineveh to an end.

When the Babylonians destroyed it in 612 BC, it was never built again, along with all who lived in it. So let's hear God's word and receive it appropriately, trembling before him and at the same time, rejoicing in his great mercy.

[29 : 16] Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you are the true and living God, the one who created the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land.

God, you're the one who has mercy, you're the one who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Please help us to hear your word rightly and to honour you and to follow you and to submit to your son, the Lord Jesus Christ and to live to his praise and glory in amongst the generation that we live.

and we pray that through us many might come to know of your great loving character and be spared the coming wrath. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.