

Keynotes from Pastor Tim's am Sermon on 16/05/2021

Series – Jonah, the runaway servant

Part 3 – “Finding God in our fear”

Text: Jonah 1 verses 4-16

All scripture references are from the ESV.

Jonah 1:4-16 But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶ So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.” ⁷ And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹ And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰ Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. ¹¹ Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they called out to the LORD, “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 you.” ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

All of us, whether we are young or old, know what it is to suffer from fear. Fear is a very powerful emotion which may cause us to react in ways that are not natural to us. Over the last 15 months we have seen this happen as the way we live our lives has been changed. Because of the fear of illness and death, or of being fined (a form of

judgement) we have accepted the need for restrictions that would have seemed unconscionable in normal times.

Where does fear come from and how can we deal with it? We may look for answers to our fears in various ways by going to the doctor, reading self-help books or turning to misuse of legal or illegal drugs. There is another way.

What if fear is something that God can use for our eternal good, to lead us to know and trust him so that we don't need to fear anything else?

We have seen that God providentially governs everything in the universe with perfect wisdom to accomplish his purposes to bring

- pagan people to know him and praise him for his grace
- his sinning people back to himself and to a place of usefulness (find out how this works in Jonah next week)

The pagan sailors came to a place where they feared the Lord exceedingly (v16 above), but it was not through the fear of death or the storm of God's judgement on Jonah. Instead:

it is the mercy of God that brings the sailors to rightly fear God.

The fear of death and of God's judgement woke them up to their need for God's mercy, but it was that very mercy that brought them to rightly fear God. **Psalm 130:4** (see p4 for full text) says 'But with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared'.

Paul tells us something similar in **Romans 2:4** (see p4). Those three fears that the sailors had are true for us all, but it is also true for all of us that **it is the mercy of God that brings us to rightly fear God.**

1. Fear of death (v4-5 above)

God brought about a great storm that imperilled the ship carrying Jonah to Tarshish, as he fled from the Lord. The lives of all on board were in danger and the sailors were afraid.

The fear of death is universal and something every human being, in whatever context, has to deal with. It is probably our biggest fear. When we face storms that threaten our life, whether it is because of a medical diagnosis, an accident or just an awareness of old age, we are filled with fear.

One way this shows is in how we talk about death. We no longer like to say someone has died or use funerals as a time to reflect on death. Instead, we say the person is lost, or passed away, and we have a celebration of their life.

We try to avoid thinking about the shortness of our own lives and about the certainty of death, but why is this?

2. Fear of judgement (vv9 – 10 above)

The sailors recognised that this was no ordinary storm. They were religious men who believed that the world was at the mercy of the gods. They had a fatalistic view, but wanted to do all they could to appease whichever god it was they might have offended. To find out who was responsible, they cast lots and discovered that it was Jonah.

Once he had told them about his God, and that he was running away from him, the sailors became not just afraid(v5), but **exceedingly** afraid (v10), as they were confronted by the anger of Jonah's God (the one true God who created the seas and the land) in the storm. This terrifying storm is directed at Jonah but it gives the sailors cause to fear exceedingly, wondering what the outcome will be for them.

- They were being confronted with this dreadful judgement of a holy God against the sin of one of his own people. How much worse might that judgement be against those who don't know or fear him?

1 Peter 4:17-18 (see p4) expresses the truth that judgement will begin with the household of God. Believers, too, are confronted with a holy God who does not take sin lightly, but punishes every transgression. Sin matters.

We want a God who overlooks our failures and doesn't hold us accountable for our wrongdoing, but that isn't the God of the Bible. Ignoring who he is in his holiness won't help us.

- We might say we don't want to talk about death but that won't stop us dying
- We might say we don't want to talk about the justice and holiness of God but that won't enable us to avoid the final judgement

Death is coming and death will bring us to the judgement of God.

The sailors know that, unless the storm stops, they will die and be brought into the terrifying judgement of Jonah's God. They need to throw Jonah overboard but they try to save themselves in their own way. They were acting with good motives (trying to save Jonah) but were also trying to save themselves. This is the essence of all man-made religion – I must do what I can to pacify (non-existent) gods or I must try harder. The sailors

- Cried out to their gods (v5) rather than calling out to the God of the Bible who made the sea
- Tried to get the boat to safety using their own efforts (v13)

Still today, people know deep in their hearts that death brings them into the presence of a deity to whom they must give account, but try to save themselves in the same ways.

- They deny that God exists or try worshipping a god that is an invention of the human mind
- They try to find ways to get themselves out of eternal danger through their own good works.

None of this works, as the sailors discovered. The storm was too great and they found that:

- The gods they cried to didn't hear them because they didn't exist
- The wind and waves were too strong for them to row against to get themselves to safety

Despite our best efforts we can never satisfy the justice of God.

- The fear of death and judgement doesn't go away

The storm of God's anger against sin is too powerful for us as humans to deal with.

3. Fear of God (vv15-16)

The storm only ceased when the sailors sacrificed Jonah to the waves. Their lives were spared because Jonah died in their place. He gave his own life to save theirs. **Their response is to fear God.**

The mercy of God in sparing their lives through sacrifice did what the fear of death and judgement couldn't do. It brought them to rightly fear God. **What does it mean to rightly fear God?** It means:

- To worship him every single day
- To commit ourselves to him in obedience for the rest of our lives
- To acknowledge that he alone is God and that he is sovereign

The sailors have been confronted with:

- the greatness of God in the storm, but did **not** commit themselves to him in the storm
- the mercy of God in sparing their lives, **and they then** commit themselves to him in worship and obedience

Many people respond to God in the storm and promise to commit to him if only he will get them out of it. However, when the storm passes, they give up on God because they only wanted him for what he could do, not for who he is.

- The sailors have come to experience **the grace of God** to save them, and that experience of grace has brought them to commit themselves to this God who has cared for them.

It is the mercy of God that brings us to rightly fear God.

We may have a great sense of awe when we see God's power displayed in the vastness of the universe he created, in the thunder of storms or the beauty of nature, but far more awesome is the truth that God has:

- set his love upon us in eternity and adopted us into his family even when we were running from him
- sent his own Son to atone for our sin and to live a righteous life on our behalf
- caused us to be born again by his own will

When we stop and think about these things, we will begin to fear God in a very personal way, and will want to worship him, commit our lives to him and live in obedience to him.

It is the mercy of God that brings us to rightly fear him.

There are seemingly enough fears in this life – why would we want to add the fear of God to them?

When you fear God rightly you do not need to fear anything else – including death and judgement.

The sailors did not perish under the judgement of God because Jonah died in their place.

The righteous anger of God was turned aside when a sacrifice for sin was made. Crucially, this points forward to the cross of Christ, which teaches us that, unlike any pagan gods, he is the God:

- who comes **himself** to put right our wrong so that we will not be condemned when Jesus returns to judge the world
- who sacrifices **himself** in our place to satisfy his own justice
- who, in the person of his Son, spends his own wrath on **himself** so that he can forgive us

We need to know deep in our hearts the reality of the truth that Jesus died not just for the sins of the world but for us and our sin personally. Then our hearts will be melted and we will come to fear God.

In fearing God, we no longer need to fear death and judgement, because the justice of God has been satisfied in the death and judgement of Jesus.

If there is no fear in death and judgement, then there is nothing we need fear.

Psalm 130: Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

² O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.

⁸ And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

Romans 2:4 Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that **God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?**

1 Peter 4:17-18 For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"