No Ordinary God: An Ordinary People

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[0:00] Well, let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for your word.

I thank you for your word which points us toward the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you for the Lord Jesus in whom is found life and health and power and all and relationship with you.

We pray tonight that as we search this passage together, as we try and understand it, that you draw us into a deeper relationship with you, that you would be at work to amend our lives and that you'd be at work to drive us toward the Lord Jesus.

We pray this in his name. Amen. Now, I've got a special thanks. Well, not a special thanks, but a special dedication in one sense tonight. First of all, I love the book of Jonah.

Jonah is just, you know, terrific stuff. You could spend years in it. It's only four chapters long, but it's wonderful. They're wonderful four chapters. And every time I get into Jonah, I find extra things that I hadn't found before.

[1:10] And so, but the thing I wanted to say is I have two Hebrew students in this service tonight that we have worked through Jonah with. So this is for you folks, the two Hebrew students in particular.

We had a great time translating Jonah this year and hopefully they'll now see it turned into a sermon, which is good. Actually, one of them is Heather and she's heard these sermons over and over again.

So, you know, but there is another person. So, look, the city of Tel Aviv lies on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. It is 30 miles from Jerusalem.

And within the modern city, there lies a far more ancient city, the ancient seaport called Joppa. Now, Joppa is famous for so many things in history. It is the port where Solomon landed the great cedars from Lebanon that he had.

It is where the Greeks fostered the legend of Andromeda. According to them, Joppa is the location of the rock from which Perseus rescued Andromeda from the great sea monster.

[2:13] Joppa is the place where Richard the Lionhearted built his citadel in the days of the Crusades. It is the place where through which Napoleon passed on his way into Palestine.

It is the location from which General Allenby routed the Turks in 1917. Joppa is a city that has this sort of mysterious romantic past.

And Joppa is the city which features in two very important stories in the Bible which have a strange similarity with each other. You see, in Acts chapter 9 and Acts chapter 10, Joppa is the city in which the Apostle Peter received his call by God to go and speak to the Gentiles.

It is from this city that Peter reluctantly goes to meet with the Gentile Cornelius and the first Gentile Christians are born.

Joppa also features in another place in the Bible. You see, in the book of Jonah, it is Joppa from which another reluctant missionary is about to depart to Gentiles in order to tell the Gentiles to listen and to repent.

[3:27] Except he doesn't do what Peter later does. In these two next, you know, these next couple of weeks, we're going to look at the book of Jonah in the next four weeks. And it's a book that is a great, that has a great story that raises some enormously important biblical themes.

So let's have a look at it together. And I've provided you, it's not very long, and I've provided you with a copy of the translation from the English Standard Version. The reason I've done that is because the Hebrew in this first chapter is particularly tricky and the NRSV stuffed it up, basically.

Well, they haven't allowed us to see some of the things that are there, and I have to spend all my time explaining it to you. Whereas if I use this text, I don't have to do that. So that's good. I don't have to quote Hebrew in it and all that sort of stuff. Sorry, Hebrew students.

Now, because this is the first talk, we need to do a bit of background research and set the scene for the story. The first thing I want to do is to explain to you a little bit about Nineveh.

Nineveh is a very important book, a very important place in the book of Jonah. It is very important in the Old Testament as a whole. Now, if you're an Old Testament student, perhaps you'll know a bit about Nineveh.

[4:37] In the Bible, the city of Nineveh represents an idea as well as a place. It represents in the Bible everything that is big, everything that is bad, and everything that is an intolerable affront to God.

Nineveh is a great and evil place and city. It is a godless place. The second thing I need to explain is a little bit about how God calls prophets in the Old Testament.

You see, there's often a distinct pattern. You can see it in a number of places in the Old Testament. You can see it with prophets such as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, to some extent Ezekiel. And the pattern goes something like this.

God calls a prophet out of their daily routine to do a great but very difficult task. And you remember the pattern. The prophet sort of has a little argument with God.

Sometimes it goes on for a few verses. Sometimes, as in Moses' case, it goes on for a chapter and a half. And the prophet argues with God and disputes with him. But eventually, the prophet caves in and agrees that they will go.

[5:43] Now, you read about that pattern? Well, the prophet Jonah is the great anti-prophet in the Old Testament in one sense, right? He's one of the great exceptions. Look at Jonah chapter 1, verses 1 to 4.

You see, God calls Jonah to preach his word. And Jonah does not argue. He does not dispute. And he does not go.

In fact, he flees from the presence of the command of God. So, you know, can you see how he's an anti-prophet? He just sort of doesn't do what prophets are meant to do. The third thing I need to explain is the city of Tarshish.

Now, it's mentioned in Jonah chapter 1, verse 3. Now, we don't know much about Tarshish from the Bible, but what we can gather is very significant. We do know this.

Tarshish is a seaport. Psalm 48 tells us this, and Isaiah 23 tells us this. Second, it is linked with Libya and Greece and other distant lands where, in inverted commas, God's fame and glory were not known.

[6:43] That's in Isaiah 66, verse 19. In other words, can you think of a more ideal place to go from God if God has called you?

Well, no, there's no better place to go because God's fame and God's glory are not known there. So, if you want to get away from God, it is the best place to go. It's a faraway place. God is not known. God is not honored.

So, there's the background to this book. We needed to get that framework so that we can grapple with it. Now, let's return to chapter 1 and look at the detail of the story. Now, I want you to remember something about Jonah.

Jonah is a Jew. Now, let me tell you a little very interesting fact about Jews in this particular period of their history. Jews were a landlocked people largely.

They were notorious landlubbers except for a few of them, but most of them did not like the sea. You see, apart from sailors and fishermen, just a few of them, most Jews hated the sea.

[7:41] For them, the sea was a place of deep, dark water. And in that water were deep, dark sea monsters. It was a place of dark, chaotic, out-of-control waves that heaved and tossed you about.

And there's a psalm all about it which talks about sailors as great heroes because they sort of could go on this water. And verse 4 tells us that being on the sea is better than being in the presence of the Lord.

Running away from God is better than... And being on the sea is a much better option than traveling toward Nineveh. And so Jonah does not go and he flees and he flees on the sea.

And as God has spoken his word to Jonah in verses 1 to 3, he now acts. Have a look at it there. In verse 4 we're told that he hurls this great wind upon the sea.

This mighty tempest breaks forth and the ship sort of threatens to break up. And verse 5 introduces us to sailors or mariners. And the mariners are outsiders.

[8:44] Remember that. This is very important for this story. They are outsiders. They are experienced sailors. But they are Gentiles. And they know nothing about he who in the Old Testament language walks on the surface of the deep.

That is who rules over the sea. They don't know about Jonah's God. They don't know about Yahweh the Lord. And they don't know that Jonah is fleeing from this God. And as their ship is tossed and shaken and turned, verse 5 tells us that they shake with fear.

And they turn to prayer. And they call upon every God they can find in an attempt to find the one that might be responsible for what is going on. And at the same time though they do some very practical things.

Did you notice it there in the text? They lighten the ship's load. So they pray and they act. They pray and they throw off things to sort of try and get there. Their precious cargo is thrown overboard in an attempt to preserve their lives.

And in the second half of that verse the camera sort of pans back to Jonah. And there he is. He's still refusing to respond. So where is he? He goes down into the hold of the ship or the front of the ship.

[9:53] He previously closed his ear to God's word. Now he shuts his eyes to God's action. And he goes to sleep. Perhaps he feels as though he's effectively escaped.

Much better you see. To be on a rocky sea. Than to be in the presence of God. So he thinks I'm safe now. Everything's alright. I've got a way. God and his insistence at preaching has been left behind.

All secure. And so in the midst of the churning sea. He finds a little bit of peace. In this corner of the boat. And the mariners search on. And eventually they find him.

There he is Jonah. Asleep. And they are absolutely dumbfounded. Have a look at their words in verse 6. What do you mean you sleeper?

Now in other words let me translate for you. What are you doing asleep? Arise. Call on your God. Maybe. Just maybe. This God will do something that no other God we've met so far.

[10:54] In this search has been able to do. Maybe your God will give us a thought. And we won't perish. Now underneath all of those questions. There's a real question isn't there. As to. And it's a question seeking an answer.

And it is this. Who is this God. That we are dealing with. And why is he doing this to us. And what has made this God.

Who controls the sea and the earth. So angry. With us. Now Jonah is now awake. And they urge him to join with them. In their search for the right God.

To contact. Contact. And placate. And verse 7 tells us. That in their search. They cast lots. And the lot falls to Jonah. And the God who controls the sea and the waves.

And who calls the prophets. He who controls the sea and the waves. Has no problem controlling the cast of a lot. Has he? And he does. Now the mariners. Therefore have found the person responsible.

[11:51] Because the lot falls to Jonah. Jonah. And they begin to interrogate Jonah. And they ply him with poor answers. And look at what they say. They say. Tell us. Tell us. On whose account has this evil come upon us. What is your occupation?

What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you? Now I reckon underneath all of that. The real questions are these.

Who is this God that we are dealing with? Why is he doing this to us? And what have you done to make him so angry with you?

And Jonah caves in. And the truth finally comes to the surface. Look at it in verse 9. I am a Hebrew. And I fear the Lord, the God of heaven. I fear the Lord.

I fear the Lord, the God of heaven. I fear the one who made the heavens and the dry land. You see these men are just horrified at what they see. They have seen the power of this God heaving the waves.

They are experienced sailors. And they have done everything in the face of his power. They have unsuccessfully battled to overcome him in the force of the wind and the waves. And they know that this God that they are dealing with is not some sort of backyard deity from some obscure place.

Some tame idol. You see the increasingly heaving waves are testifying to him. And so in verse 11 they ask how they should respond to this God.

And verse 12 tells us that Jonah says throw me overboard basically. And they are not convinced. So unlike Jonah you see. This is very interesting isn't it? Unlike Jonah who was willing to sleep when the mariners were in danger.

They do their best to look after him. So he had no interest in looking after them. They have every interest in looking after him. They row hard. In the Hebrew this is a little bit of Hebrew for the students.

They dig into the waves. That's what literally it means that they dug through the waves. It's a marvelous image. They really rowed hard. They worked hard. And verse 13 tells us that as the sea grows.

[13:59] As that happens the sea grows more and more tempestuous. Before long they are left with no choice. They must get rid of Jonah. And so they proceed in the appropriate manner.

You are about to kill someone basically. So you do the right thing. They call upon the Lord this foreign God. And they ask for his understanding and his favor. They don't want to offend him after all.

You know they have seen him offended. They don't want to keep going with that. And so they ask him to stop them making a mistake. And prevent them from shedding innocent blood. And then they act as agents of God's justice.

They pick up the recalcitrant. And they hurl him into the sea. And immediately it's as though the light switch or the storm switch has been turned off.

But the sea returns to its normal state. The men realize they've been in the hands of a real God. And verse 16 tells us that they fear the Lord exceedingly. And offer sacrifices.

[14:55] And make vows. And the presence of the God of heaven. And the Lord of the sea and the dry land. They bow. And they worship. So there's the story from two different perspectives.

Now let's turn and ask ourselves. Why do you reckon God placed this chapter here? What is it all about? Why tell this story about this prophet? And his running away from God?

What is its purpose? What does God want us to learn from it tonight? Well the first and the foremost thing. Is I think that he wants us to learn that he's a creator. I mean that just so riddles this chapter doesn't it?

This chapter is about a real God. And this chapter tells us a number of critical things about this real God. First he is a creator. He is the one who made the heaven and the dry land.

And the sea and all that is in it. He is the one who in the language of the Old Testament sits above the circle of the earth. And walks on the surface of the deep. He creates the world.

[15:55] He sustains the world. He controls the elements. He bends them to do his will. And to do what his will is. And the God of Jonah and the God of the Bible are a creator.

He is a real God. Worthy of the name God. And worthy of the worship. Of worship as God. So that's the first thing about this. He's a creator. Second this passage tells us that this creator of the world has a will for his world.

And that means he has a word for his world. And that word must be given. It is a word of judgment and of responsibility and of salvation.

And it will be delivered. Because that's why he speaks to his world. Nothing will stand in his way. You see not even recalcitrant prophets will stand in the way of this God.

His word will be spoken one way or another. Now I reckon we as Christians know the reality of this God. Don't we you see? We know what lengths the God of this world will go to to speak his word.

[16:57] For we know that God sent his son into the world to live and to die as God's ultimate and final word. Do you remember the words of John 1? Listen to them.

They're just marvelously striking in this regard. In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. God. And the word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

Through him all things were made. And without him was nothing made that has been made. And in him was the life of men. It was life.

And the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness. But the darkness has not understood it. And then in verse 14. The word became flesh. And made his dwelling among us.

And we have seen his glory. The glory of the one and only. Who came from the Father. Full of grace and truth. You see what lengths God will go to to bring his word to his world.

[17:57] Third. This passage teaches us that God is a redeemer. You see God's nature as redeemer. Is clearly seen here isn't it. You see we see his nature to rescue. We see his nature to redeem.

We see his compassion. We see him reaching out to sinners like Jonah. And we see him rescuing such people. Even recalcitrant prophets and Gentile mariners are object of his love and concern.

And we Christians know this don't we. We know God's a redeemer. For we know that even while we were sinners. Even when we were God's enemies. Even when we were at war with God. Christ died for us.

The New Testament is clear about such things. And it says it in Romans 6 verses 6 to 8. You see at the right time Romans 6 says. While we're still powerless. Christ died for the ungodly.

And rarely will anyone die for a righteous man. Though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God's love is overwhelming. God demonstrates his great love for us in this.

[18:56] That while we were still sinners. While we're still like Jonah. Christ died for us. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ is the God of love. He's the redeemer. And even those who are far away are objects of his love. Even his enemies. Are those upon whom he sets his affection. Now.

All those three truths are there. But let me tell you. I don't think they're the main purpose for which Jonah is written. Jonah's written for another purpose. And let me show you. It's just this wonderful little secret within the book.

These great doctrines are present. They're not the main lesson of the chapter. And I think most people miss it. So I think the main lesson of the chapter is found in verses 9 to 10. Have a look at it.

We're going to look at them in detail. Just very quickly. These are the keys to unlocking this chapter. Let me explain. I wonder when we read through. Did you hear. See.

[19:52] Notice. The word fear. And it's related words. They appear four times in this chapter. Look at verse 5. The mariners were afraid.

Verse 9. Jonah says. I fear the Lord. Verse 10. The mariners are exceedingly afraid. Then in verse 16.

The mariners fear the Lord exceedingly. Now let's have a look at the two parties in the story. With this word fear in mind again. This time let's concentrate on what's been said about fear.

Because this really is the crux of everything here. You see. First look at Jonah. Verse 9 says that he fears the Lord. Now what do you reckon fear actually means in the Old Testament? Think about it for a moment. When you hear the word fear in the Old Testament.

What do you think it means? You see. It's a technical term. In the Old Testament. And in the Old Testament. To fear the Lord. Normally means. Respecting him. Revering him. Submitting to him.

[20 : 48] Trembling before him as God. Giving God prominence in your life. Living as though the God that you are fearing really is feared. That is really God.

So people who fear God in the Old Testament normally express their fear in what way? Well. They hear him and they obey him and they serve him. They yield their lives up to him. They say. Your life.

My life is in your hands. Now in this chapter. Jonah. In Jonah. We're told that Jonah can say the words. Did you notice that? But this chapter has strikingly told us.

That the words don't mean very much to him. Now it seems as though the words are little more than a creed to him. You know he drags it out at the appropriate moment. Oh yes. Yes. I'm a Hebrew. I fear the Lord. The God of heaven and earth.

Who made the sea and the dry land. Yes. That's me. That's my identity. He can say it before Gentiles. But he hardly lives it.

[21:46] Does he? He hardly lives it. He's hardly interested in the reality of it. For when God speaks. What does he do? He runs. When God acts.

What does he do? He sleeps. When God judges in Jonah chapter 4. What does he do? He sulks about it. And doesn't like what God is doing. You see Jonah is God's person.

In the sense that. Yes he belongs to God. But he's not God's person. In the sense. Of anything that he is. Jonah is rescued at the end of this chapter.

But let me tell you. He's not rescued because he's good. He's certainly not rescued because he's good. He's not rescued because he's a good God fearing man.

Like he says he is. Jonah is a man who knows the fear of God in here. He can recite it with his tongue. But he's very happy to reap the benefits of it.

[22:41] As we'll discover in the next chapter. Jonah is a man who's happy to have the privileges of being among God's people. But he's very, very, very reluctant to exercise the responsibilities of being God's person.

You see he's hardly a man who lives in the fear of God. Is he? He's hardly one who lives like one who resides in the presence of God. In fact he wants to get out of the presence of God.

That's not what a God fearing person does. The mariners recognize it immediately. And they are absolutely shocked by his ungodliness.

How can you run from a God like this is in effect what they're saying. Now let's have a closer look at the mariners and their fear. Because there's another side to the mariners.

Remember these mariners are rank outsiders. You know they're Gentiles. They're strangers to God and his purposes. As Paul would put it in the New Testament. They're without God.

[23:38] And without hope in the world. They have their own gods. But look at what happens to them. First they face the elements as God controls them and moves them here and there. And what is their response?

They fear. And then they act. And they search for the God who's behind the stormy elements. And then did you see verse 10? They've tracked down the God who's responsible. And they hear of him from Jonah.

And he says I fear that God. And we're told they fear the Lord exceedingly. Can you hear what the writer's telling you? Jonah can say oh I fear the Lord the God of heaven and earth. But the mariners they fear the Lord exceedingly.

In the Hebrew it's they fear with a very great fear. Not with the sort of token fear. Of the God man. The prophet. You see they've tracked down the God responsible.

They hear from Jonah. They fear him exceedingly. And they're exceedingly afraid of the consequences of what has happened. Having glimpsed the reality of this God. They're horrified at Jonah. Now how could a worshipper of such a great God be so trite about him?

[24:43] How could one who says he fears the Lord the God of heaven and earth. The one who made the sea and the dry land. Be asleep. While he calls. How could he run.

While he speaks. How could he not stand in awe of his action. Now take a look at verse 16. This is the third reference to fear in this chapter. Have a look at the mariners.

We are told that they fear the Lord exceedingly. It's that. Feared with a very great fear again. And what do they do? They offer sacrifices. They make vows. Where Jonah should have vowed obedience in response to God's call.

What do the mariners do? They do it. Now let me just remind us all here. That I reckon we have all of us. If we are Christians.

At some point been in the place where the mariners have been. I have. And maybe you have. Now perhaps we could sort of just stop for a moment. And corporately remember. Go back across the years.

[25:41] For some of you it's not very far. For some of us it's a lot further. Go back across those years. And bring into your memory the day you first felt the fear of God. Do you remember it?

Now I reckon there are a number of you here today. Who have felt that fear of God. Experienced the fear of God like these mariners. Dig into your hearts and remember it. If this has been you. Remember the day when you first found out.

How lost you were. Remember that day when you first became aware. That there is a God who is holy. And in front of that God's holiness.

You became aware of your own sinfulness. Now it could have been in a hundred places. A thousand places. It might have been during a sermon. It might have been when you were reading the scriptures.

It might have been something your parents said at some point. It may have been when you were deep in prayer. It may have been some event that brought. God brought about to bring you into his.

[26:43] You know that God brought about in his providence. Through whatever mechanism it was. You became aware of God in a way you never had before. And God caused you to look inside yourself.

And when you did. You discovered a terrifying truth. You discovered a great evil lurked within your heart. And you remembered your past.

And you remembered with great shame. And perhaps even with disgust. And you knew that if God was God. He would inevitably punish you.

And fear began to take possession of your heart. And you knew that death was to be feared. Because it would mean you would meet this God. Your maker.

But you knew death. You knew death could not be. You know life could not be lived. Knowing that you are so out of tune with the design of your maker.

[27:46] And if you're Christian. Then you know what God did. Don't you? For if you're a Christian. You know that God brought to you the great news of Jesus. And you know.

That as you heard the story. You realized the God man died for you. He died in your place. He faced that penalty from God.

And he took the punishment that was due to you. And as you took on this great news. And were overwhelmed by it. You realized there'd be no hell for you.

You knew what you deserved. And you knew it was not for you any longer. There would be no abandonment by God. Of you. You were redeemed in Christ.

And you feared the Lord exceedingly. And before him you fell and gave your life. Either literally or metaphorically. Or whatever it was. Now friends. I want to close tonight's talk.

[28:48] By telling you about the great tragedy of Jonah. I wonder if you can see it. Here is Jonah. Jonah. He's a man who has all the benefits of being God's person. And they are enormous.

Did you hear them in Romans 2 that we read? Enormous. They were not without God and without hope in the world. They knew God. They had his word. They had everything they needed for life.

But here is Jonah. Who has all of that. The benefits of being God's person. But he ignores God. On the other hand.

These mariners. These rank outsiders. Respond how Jonah should have. The tragedy of Jonah. Let me tell you friends. Is a tragedy for us as well.

You see. I think many of us here. Are just like Jonah. Jonah. But let me tell you. If you think he's in a bad place. We are more culpable than Jonah. Let me explain what I mean.

You see. We have heard a message far greater than Jonah ever heard. We have seen something far greater than the upheaval of the created order.

We have heard God's great and living word in the person and work of Jesus. And he who is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being has been revealed to us.

The great God. The great creator of heaven and earth in human form. We know. And we have seen the upheaval in the heart of God as his son dies in our place.

And we Christians though. Often insult our God. You see. He urges us to read his word. And we know it.

And we run out of time. He challenges us with obedience to him. And we flee from the threat. We come to church and Bible study. And we treat his word with complacency. As though it really didn't matter all that much.

[30:44] We recite creeds about him. And we sing songs of his greatness and his majesty. But let's face it. I think friends. And I'm among this. That often I sleep in deep slumber.

And perhaps you do as well. Oblivious to this God's actions. And we shield ourselves. We've got these shields within us that are full of justifications.

And they shield off the challenges that he confronts us with. And we shake off his word. We have great privileges. But we have often run from the responsibilities that go with them.

Well friends. If that is you. I want to urge you tonight to stop. Please stop and take stock. Think about the mariners.

These outright pagans. And how they fear the Lord. You see. And then think about those outright pagans you have met. Who have met.

[31:47] Who have heard about Jesus. Do you remember those ones you've met. Who have just recently become Christians. And you remember their joy. Their enthusiasm. Their fear. Do you remember how you once had felt that fear and enthusiasm and joy yourself.

And take a lesson from them friends. And from your own experience. Be shamed by them. Bow again. Bow again before the God of all the earth today. Who has become so commonplace perhaps to you.

And go back to the cross. And stare at what it tells you about God. And about yourself. And go back to the scriptures and read them yet again. And let them be fresh again for you.

And fear the God that you meet there. And love him. And obey him. And stop running from him.

And live what you profess. You see friends. We have been given the greatest privilege a human can possess. We are in relationship with the living God.

[32:46] The creator of all. And the redeemer of this world. And this God calls us to respond. In so many different ways. And you yourself in this last week. Will know of the ways he's called you to respond.

And he calls us to reflect the privilege we have been given. In responsible and godly living. Don't be shamed by the mariners.

Friends. For we have a living and true God. The author of heaven and earth. The creator of the sea and the dry land. And the one who sent Jesus into the world.

He is our God. Let's reflect the privilege we have in responsible living. Go back later on and read Romans 2. It's a terrible condemnation of the Jews. And make sure it's not a condemnation of us as well.

Let's pray together. Father God. Please forgive us. That so often we run from you.

[33:50] Forgive us that so often we're shamed by people who really have not had all the privileges that we have had. And yet respond in such honesty and forthrightness and fear towards you.

Please make us people that fear the Lord. The God of heaven and earth. And bow before the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Father we pray this in Jesus name.

God of heaven and earth. God of heaven. I'm so blessed. I pray and be from you. I'm so blessed right in Jesus. God of heaven and earth.

God of heaven and earth. God of heaven and earth. And while this life is my son of heaven. For God of heaven and earth. God of heaven. Amen. See for you. Let's pray and be EXEC. God of heaven. God of heaven and earth. Let's pray.

God of heaven and earth. TO