



THE GOD WHO RULES

Today we begin a series on a small book, Jonah being one of the Minor Prophets, and yet in its own way it's a whopper of a story (hence the title of this series).

Why? It's not just because of a certain sea creature that makes an appearance later on. It's because the message of Jonah encapsulates the message of the whole Bible, and captures the heart of God for His people. *All* people.

Yes, Jonah is a gospel-focused book – but one that's addressed to God's people, first. So, let's take a look at:

Jonah 1

What is the scariest thing you've ever been asked to do?

In vs1-2, we're introduced to the scariest thing Jonah was ever asked to do: "Go to the great city of Nineveh ..."

Now this was not an easy assignment. In fact, this was a suicide mission. Nineveh was the capital city of one of the most powerful and aggressive empires of Jonah's day – the Assyrian Empire. And the Assyrians had a reputation for incredible cruelty. To illustrate the point, I have some photos of a wall from the palace of Nineveh, and it depicts a battle: the siege of the Judean city of Lachish, recorded for us in 2 Kings ch18. And if you look carefully, you can see the Assyrian war-machine in full swing: archers and

stone-slingers launching their weapons at the city; siege-towers and battering-rams crashing into the walls; Jewish captives being impaled on long vertical spikes.

And that's where God tells Jonah to go – to *that* place. And Jonah responds in a way you would expect any decent man or woman of God to respond. Roughly translated:

"You gotta be kiddin'!"

Instead, he goes down to Joppa, hitches a ride on a Phoenician trading boat, and heads off for Tarshish, in the western Mediterranean – in the complete *opposite* direction! It would be like God telling you to go to Tehran and you head off for Disneyland Florida, instead!

Sometimes, God can ask us to do some tough things. It might be sharing Jesus with people around us who may or may not be sympathetic to what we believe. It might be living out a consistent Christian life at home or at school or in our place of work. It might be stepping out of our nice Christian comfort-zones and getting alongside people who need to know God loves them. We are all called to go to Nineveh, and sometimes our instinctive response is to run away. Why? Because the thing we're being asked to do is too big for us (or seems that way).

And that is a key word that runs throughout the first chapter of Jonah – the word 'great' or 'big' (*gadol* in Hebrew). E.g. Nineveh is referred to as "that great city." We're told that God sent a "great wind" into the sea, and that the storm that rose up was a "great storm." Not surprisingly, the sailors were gripped with a "great fear." And the sea creature that eventually swallowed Jonah was a "great fish."

Jonah was faced with things far bigger, far tougher than him, and yet through it all, God proves to be biggest and toughest of all.

In fact, there are 3 things in particular that this chapter has to teach us about God's greatness:

1) No-one Is Beyond God's Will. God is the creator of all things, from the wind and the waves to the plants and the animals – as well as us. But He is also sovereign. What does that mean? It means God is more powerful than anything else, He's in control - and He never drops the ball (hence Jonah's words in vs9). So, the Assyrian Empire may have *seemed* like the apex superpower of the 8th century BC, but compared to God, it was nothing but an ants' nest! The same goes for the people and situations to which God is sending *us*. They might seem daunting, but God is in charge. So, what are we afraid of?

2) No-one Is Beyond God's Love. God cares about every human being on the planet, no matter who we are, where we come from, or what we believe. That includes the Assyrians, the Phoenicians – even disobedient Jonah! This is important, because Christians of a hyper-Calvinist persuasion believe in what's called 'limited atonement': that when Jesus died, He only died for those who were going to trust in Him. But that's not what the Bible says.

“For God so loved the world” means exactly that. Yes, to make His forgiveness our own, we have to accept it. But it doesn’t change the fact that God loves us – *all* of us.

3) No-one Is Beyond God’s Reach. Because God is sovereign over everything, and everyone matters to Him, no-one is beyond salvation, no matter how far away they may seem at present. You may know people you’ve been praying for; you’ve shared the Gospel with them, but still ... nothing. And you may be thinking, “This is a waste of time. This is never going to happen.” Now obviously there are no guarantees, and people still have to *choose* to love God (that’s the nature of love, after all), but the point of this chapter – and of this book – is that no-one is too far away; no-one is too sinful (even us).

You can see these principles at work in the Phoenician sailors. When the storm kicks off, they start praying to whatever idols they can lay their hands on. They even resort to superstition to find out who is responsible for their bad luck (a case of “Who shot the albatross?”). But when they throw Jonah into the sea and everything calms down, they offer sacrifices to *Yahveh*, the God of Israel, and make vows and promises to Him, instead.

And the point is: no-one is beyond God’s will, God’s love, or God’s reach.

Because He is the God who rules.

Is Your God Big Enough?

So, what is God saying to *us* through all this?

Whenever we run away from doing what God tells us to, it is usually because we have lost sight of one simple truth: nothing is as big as God. When we tell ourselves “I’m not clever enough or gifted enough or holy enough to share my faith”, it is because our vision of God is not big enough. When we do the ‘Sunday-only-Christian’ thing and keep our Christianity to ourselves, safely tucked away, it is because our vision of God is not big enough. And when our Christianity becomes all about us and what we get out of it rather than reaching lost people for Christ, it is because our vision of God is not big enough.

As police-chief Brody says in *Jaws*, “You’re gonna need a bigger boat.” Or in our case, a bigger God.

And we, like Jonah, like those sailors, and like the Assyrians later on in the book, need to remember:

He is the God who rules.