The God who pursues
Jonah 1:1-17

For the next few weeks we are going to be studying the book of Jonah, and we've called this little series: Pursued by Grace – Lessons from the Life of Jonah. Now, before we read chapter 1 together I want you to complete the following sentence:

Jonah and the ….

If you know anything about this book, it's the whale, or the big fish. If I were to ask some of our kids, 'what's your favourite Bible story?', I can almost guarantee Jonah would make the short list – because it's got a whale in it!

And yet the fish is hardly talked about in the book. He only gets a walk on part. In fact, as one preacher said (G Campbell Morgan), 'men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God.' You see, in other Bible stories the prophet is the heroic messenger of God. But in this book, the prophet, Jonah, isn't the hero. Far from it. And neither is the fish. In Jonah, it's God – God who is gracious to people who don't deserve it, who's the hero of the book.

And it is an action packed book. There are only 48 verses in the whole thing, but the writer manages to pack in a rebellious prophet, a storm to rival Sandy, the conversion of some pagan sailors, a miraculous rescue by a fish, the repentance of a whole city, which just happens to be Israel's arch-enemy, an excruciatingly honest conversation between a prophet and God and then ends it all with a question that confronts us with what is going on in our hearts.

So we are in for a great few weeks.

Jonah 1:1-17 (we'll only cover the first 3 verses and set the scene for the rest).

Verse 1: The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai.

Now when I was a junior doctor, we had to sit these post-graduate medical exams to help us climb up the ladder, it was called the Membership Exam, the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians, and you couldn't get promoted in hospital medicine without it. And they were nerve-wracking things. There was a written part, which was ok enough, but the killer was the clinical exam. You'd be assigned two examiners, two senior, top-of-the-pile medics who would take you from one volunteer patient to another and you had to physically examine these patients, their abdomen, or their chest, or how they walked and come up with the right diagnosis, all under the watching gaze of the examiners. And typically, one examiner would be a bit more reserved, whilst the other would play the nice guy, and be all smiley. But he was the one you needed to watch out for – he was the one who would lull you into a false sense of security before stabbing you in the back with some terrible, un-diagnosable case. And we called such examiners, 'smiling death'. You think he's a dove, but in reality, he's a hawk.

Well, interestingly Jonah's name means 'dove'. But there wasn't much dovelike about Jonah – the truth is he was a hawk. The only other time Jonah gets mentioned in the Old Testament is in 2 Kings 14. It's around 780BC. Let's read it:

‘In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. (2 Kings 14:23-25).’ And, if you don’t know, Gath- Hepher was in Galilee.

Now to understand Jonah, the man and the book, you’ve got to get a hold of the context of his ministry. His immediate predecessors were the prophets Elijah and Elisha. It’s even possible Jonah was trained up by them in one of their schools for the prophets. But whilst we don’t know that for certain, what we do know is that in Jonah’s time, the people of Israel were divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom was Israel, with King Jeroboam II, who was evil, reigning in the capital Samaria. And in the south was the Kingdom of Judea, which had stayed loyal to the house of David.

And Jonah is a prophet in the northern kingdom. And at the same time as Jonah, the prophets Amos and Hosea were also preaching. But Jonah’s message was very different from theirs. Amos and Hosea were constantly calling Israel back to repentance, challenging their idol worship, preaching against the corruption of the rulers, and warning of the consequences if they didn’t turn back to God.

But Jonah’s message was different. Whilst they were preaching repentance, Jonah was preaching an expansionist agenda. It may not be too much to say that Jonah ignored King Jeroboam’s wrongdoing to further his nationalistic message, as he urged the king and the people: ‘expand the borders, recapture the land, national security first and foremost, Israel for Israel.’

And 2 Kings makes clear that this was God’s grace to Israel. – 2 Kings 14:26 ‘For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel.’ In other words, the northern kingdom of Israel was in a mess and vulnerable to attack, and though they had deserted God, God had not deserted them. There was no one else to help Israel, so through Jonah’s words, God becomes Israel’s helper, and through Jonah’s preaching and King Jeroboam’s response to it, God brought about some respite for the people from their enemies. But ultimately, as Hosea and Amos made clear, true security for Israel would only ever come, not by military might or secure borders, but through returning to God.

But just think about it. How would people, especially someone from the southern kingdom of Judah, someone who was faithful to God, who was hearing this book read in the synagogue, have thought about Jonah? They would have viewed Jonah as at least somewhat suspect, a populist, a nationalistic hawk from the rebellious north, banging the national security drum, maybe helping prop up a corrupt regime that was neck-deep in idolatry. A prophet? A man to whom the word of the Lord came? Yes, but…

So that's our man Jonah, and this morning we're going to look at three things: Running from God, running from grace, and one greater than Jonah.

Running From God

Well, tainted or not, the word of the Lord does indeed come to Jonah and God tells him, v2, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it."

Now, if a faithful Jew reading this had any doubts about Jonah, those doubts would have been dwarfed by how he felt about Nineveh. In their eyes Nineveh would have been the epitomy of wickedness, the very centre of an empire of evil. Within a few decades of Jonah's ministry, the Assyrian empire, of which Nineveh became the capital, would wipe the northern kingdom Israel off the map.

And her kings and people were unspeakably cruel and they boasted of it. They reveled in torturing prisoners taken in battle, their art depicts them flaying their victims alive, beheading thousands, parading the heads on poles, pulling out the tongues and testicles and gouging out the eyes and dismembering their live victims.

And God wants Jonah to go and preach to them? To the enemy? Can you see how those who first read this would be thinking, 'I know I'm a bit dubious of Jonah, but God sending him to Nineveh?'

Well, that is what God calls him to do – to go and call out against the city, "for their evil has come up before me." And that reason for Jonah going matters. You see, when later on we see God extending grace to Nineveh, it is not that He is blind to their evil. The whole reason for Jonah's mission is that God sees their evil, that Nineveh has reached a line. When we see wickedness or injustice in the world, we want God to act now, to sort it now, but more than once in Scripture it's apparent that God is waiting, holding back judgment, until a line is crossed, and Nineveh is fast approaching that line.

So God tells his prophet, 'Arise and go to Nineveh and preach.' And when you read something like that, you expect the next verse will go something like, 'and Jonah immediately went to Nineveh and there proclaimed the word of the Lord.' Except that isn't what happens.

Verse 3, 'But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.' God tells Jonah to rise up, and he rises up; He tells him to go immediately and he goes immediately, except God tells him to go east and Jonah heads west. In fact he goes as far in the opposite direction as he could go. Now, no-one knows exactly where Tarshish is, but it was probably Tartessos, a Phoenician colony on the Atlantic coast of southern Spain. For Jonah, it's the edge of the world. He couldn't go any further. It would be like you being told by the Lord in a dream to go to Zurich and preach against those terrible Swiss Germans, and instead you go down to Geneva airport and go the Swiss Air desk and ask 'any tickets out of here' and they say, 'well, we have one leaving for Zurich in a couple of hours', and you say, 'er, I was hoping for something a bit more westerly', and they say, 'well,

we've got a seat for New York in an hour, but you'll need to be quick' and you go, 'that'll do nicely'. Jonah could not have made his intentions any clearer. He wants to get as far away from God and His call as he can.

And there's something tragic about that. You see, here he was, a prophet, a man who had been used to bring God's word to others, a man who heard God's word for himself, a man honoured by a call from God, and he is in full-blown desertion. And the tragedy of that is that no past obedience, no past fruitfulness can substitute for present day obedience; and starting well, and finishing well are two very different things. So, as you watch Jonah heading for the sea-port, just do a spiritual check-up: am I living on left overs? Am I living on past reputation, on the memory of past obedience, past fruitfulness, past spiritual fervor? Am I making progress in my walk with God, or is that all in the past?

Look how the writer puts it. He says that Jonah 'rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.' Now Jonah's no fool, is he? – I mean he knows his Bible, he's been to seminary, he knows Psalm 139 'Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?' He knows there's nowhere he can run to escape God; he knows that God is not some king of territorial deity, that He's just god in Israel; as he says to the sailors in the storm, (v9) the God he serves is 'the God of Heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' Jonah knows God is omnipresent.

So, he's not running from God's omnipresence, he's running from His felt presence. It's his relationship with God that Jonah is fleeing. He wants to put himself in the position where God no longer makes demands on him, where the consciousness of God no longer impinges on his heart. It's like a man saying of his marriage – I'm out of here, I'm quitting, I'm shutting down emotionally. And because he's a prophet, he's also saying, 'I don't want to serve you anymore. Here's my badge, here's my security pass.'

You know, when life is good, it's easy to walk with God isn't it? But when things are tough and stuff isn't going the way you want, and God is asking stuff of you that you just don't want, and taking you places you just don't want to go - and I don't just mean geographically, then sometimes, in the pain of that, it can seem easiest to check out, and shut down and turn your back on God. And that's what Jonah's doing. He just wants out. And yet it is that very relationship and being in that felt presence of God that gives our lives meaning, that gives us our identity and that sense of poise in those times of trial.

But thankfully, whilst we may turn our back on God, God does not reciprocate by turning His back on us. Instead He pursues us as He pursues Jonah. And as He does with Jonah He will even use our circumstances – even storms of life – to get our attention and bring us back to the place where we can feel His presence and hear His word again. You see, we could look at the kind of storm Jonah experienced and think, he's being pursued by an angry, vengeful God. But that couldn't be further from the truth. And we could look at the storms of our lives and think the same – and all the time it is God in His love and grace pursuing us, for our good. And that pursuit of grace is Jonah's only hope.

But Jonah doesn't know that yet. Instead, v3, 'He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.'

Just imagine it: he's made up his mind to run. He goes down to the port, looking for a boat to Tarshish and low and behold there's one going just where he wants. He asks the captain how much the passage will cost and low and behold, he has just the right money. What a divine appointment! – not. You see, just because you've got the money to do something, doesn't mean you should do it; just because there's an open door, doesn't mean you should walk through it. And in walking through that door and going down into that boat Jonah's problems were just beginning.

But just ask yourself, why does Jonah run in the first place? Because it's not that he doesn't understand what God's asking him, is it? I mean, the call is very clear and simple: Arise and go to Nineveh. No, it's not that he doesn't understand, it's that he does understand. And so often it's the same with us, isn't it? It's not the bits of the Bible we don't understand that we find difficult to swallow, but those that we do understand that we struggle with and want to turn our backs on.

So why does he turn his back on God so dramatically? What has God asked of this prophet that should cause such an earthquake in his life? Well, maybe you've known someone, or at least heard about them on the news, who has done something or been caught doing something that is seemingly totally out of character. And the whole edifice of their life comes crashing down. And you're left thinking, how did that happen? Why did they do that? But what becomes obvious over time is that edifice wasn't an edifice at all, it was a façade. And far from acting out of character, these earthquakes are very often their real character, the real them coming to the surface.

And that was Jonah. This turning on his heels and fleeing, wasn't some kind of sudden nervous breakdown, out of the blue, totally unexpected. It was the outcome of what had been going on in his heart for years.

Running from Grace

So why does he run? Is he afraid? Is he afraid that he will go and preach this message of repentance and the Ninevites will treat him as they do their other enemies? Or if he's not afraid of death, is he afraid of failure – that rather than kill him, the people will just ignore him? After all – for someone who has enjoyed the limelight and the applause, who has been used to people responding to his word, to be ignored might just be a fate worse than death.

Well, those are all plausible – but the truth is that far from Jonah being afraid of failure, he's afraid of success.

You see, if you don't know the story, what happens is that in the end Jonah does go to Nineveh, and he does call out against them and incredibly, Nineveh does repent. But that repentance means that God does not pour out his judgment on

the city and that is too much for Jonah, and in his anger he says to God, 4:2: 'O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.'

So the reason Jonah runs is that he knows that if God has called him to preach repentance to Nineveh there is every likelihood that they will repent, and of all things Jonah does not want that to happen. You see, he's happy to preach a message of security and victory and advance to his own people, but he is extremely unhappy at the thought of preaching a message that might result in the salvation of his people's enemies.

Now, if he had preached that same message against Nineveh in Israel, he would have cemented his popularity in the eyes of his own people, but to go to Nineveh itself and preach against it with a view to its repenting and salvation, that is another matter entirely. After all, what would his own people think?

Jonah's used to being the hero preacher and if people hear that he's been to Nineveh and through his preaching delayed the city's judgment so that they remain a threat to Israel, what will that do for his reputation? Thanks a lot Jonah! Instead of the hero prophet he'll become the traitor prophet. So, just maybe, part of what lies at the root of this is that he cares more about his popularity, than obeying God. He cares more about what others think of him than what God thinks, because that's where he gets his significance, his sense of self-worth from. And isn't that a trap all of us can fall into? We don't want to offend others, we don't want to stand out, sometimes someone will even accept abuse against them self, all because we want this other person's affirmation. And so Jonah would rather run than have others deride him.

But there's something else here. The hard truth is that Jonah's nationalism, his patriotism meant more to him than thousands of Ninevites perishing. Frankly, he would rather they perished, so deeply was his identity tied to his people. And God simply meant less to Jonah than either his reputation or his nationalism. This was what defined him. This was his identity; it was all tied up with Israel and the land and his nationality, and his racial pedigree and his politics. This was greater than God in his life and so for him it had become an idol, and he was prepared to sacrifice his relationship with God for that idol.

Now, patriotic nationalism may not be your idol. Your reputation in the eyes of others may not be your idol. But just ask yourself, is there anything that you hold dearer, anything that you would sacrifice your relationship with God for? Now, of course, we wouldn't put it like that – but what happens when this thing – maybe your position at work, or a relationship or academic success is taken away, or threatened in some way? How does that affect your relationship with God? Does a coldness creep in? You may not take the first plane to Tarshish, but do you nevertheless, in your heart, turn your back on God? And if you can identify something like that in your heart, then that's your idol – because that's where you get your self-worth, your significance, your identity from. And when those things are undermined – things start crumbling.

Well, for Jonah, God had signaled His desire to extend mercy and grace to Israel's greatest enemy, to turn them back from the precipice and He has chosen the man for whom that is utterly unthinkable. Jonah wants judgment, not grace. What he discovers, as we'll see next week, is that same grace pursues him.

But as we finish up and watch Jonah heading for the port, I want you to think about another prophet from Galilee, this time from Nazareth.

One Greater than Jonah

When Jesus was in dispute with the religious leaders of His day – the scribes and the Pharisees – He compares their unwillingness to repent with the Ninevites who did repent at Jonah's preaching. And He said, 'something greater than Jonah is here' (Matt 12:41).

You see, Jonah refused the call to go to his enemies in Nineveh, but Jesus came willingly to a world in rebellion.

Jonah wanted nothing to do with a message of grace and repentance for those neck deep and lost in sin. But Jesus is the very embodiment of grace. As John puts it in his gospel: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). And Jesus didn't just preach grace – he lived and died it that we might receive it.

Jonah couldn't face the thought of what going to Nineveh might do to his reputation. But Jesus made himself of no reputation – in the words of Paul, 'Though [Christ] was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross' (Phil 2:6-8).

So, as you watch Jonah head for his boat out of here, thank God for Jesus – the one greater than Jonah, full of grace and truth, the grace that pursues sinners. Sinners like Jonah and sinners like us.