

# Terrifying In Power

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[ 0 : 00 ] Jonah chapter one, we're going to read from verse one. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amitya saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose to flee from Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found the 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.

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. 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 innermost part of the ship, and had lain down, and was fast asleep.

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.

[ 1 : 06 ] 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 a lot fell on Jonah. 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? And he said to them, I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea in the dry land.

Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, What is this that you've done? For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord because he had told them.

Then they said to him, What shall we do to you so that the sea may quiet down for us? For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. And 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. Nevertheless the men rode hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.

[ 2 : 08 ] Therefore they called out to the Lord, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blight. For you, O Lord, have done what has pleased you.

So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Well, the book of Jonah is probably one of the best known books of the Bible. I suspect that if you ask people in the street to name a story in the Bible, that Jonah and the whale would be in the top five.

Because it is an exciting story, isn't it? It's got epic Hollywood proportions. There's a dramatic storm at sea, a prayer inside a sea monster, a violent city, a disobedient prophet, and then something about a plant at the end that we normally forget about.

Well, why did God give us the story of Jonah? I'm looking forward to going through Jonah over the next few weeks because woven through this epic narrative, God lays down a sobering challenge for us.

[ 3 : 13 ] And that is that your God is too small. That's the title of our series. That could be the title of the book. Because while Jonah is the main actor, the drama comes from this fact that again and again Jonah underestimates God.

And you know that's something that we all do. Maybe you first heard about God as a child, maybe reading, hearing a story in Sunday school or stories like Jonah.

But that's where God has remained until now. He's just remained a character in a child's fantasy. Or maybe your interactions of church has made you conclude that God is somehow like a divine policeman, you know, punishing or rewarding the good and punishing the bad if you're lucky rewarding the good, maybe.

Like God is some kind of divine Santa. Christians aren't immune either to underestimating God. All too often our day to day is very different to our day to day understanding of God is very different to what we claim to believe about the God of the Bible as we'll come to see later in this chapter.

Jonah comes and says to us, your God is too small. This is a book that is written to burst the box that we put God in to stretch our understanding of God.

[ 4 : 37 ] So let's dive into chapter one. Your God is too small. He is terrifyingly powerful. First let's look at the prophet who fled. Now we don't know much about Jonah from outside this book.

And the only other reference we get to Jonah is in the Bible is in two Kings chapter 14 verse 25.

And if you were to flick there in your own time, you'd find that Jonah prophesied in what was the northern kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam the second, around 753 to 718.

So when Israel split, they became two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel, the southern kingdom of Judah. And if you like history, you might be interested to know that the time Jonah was prophesying was the same time two guys called Romulus and Remus supposedly established the village of Rome.

However, long before Rome had become the major superpower of the day, Assyria was the superpower at the time. Assyria was the big bad guy compared to Israel who pushed Israel around. And Nineveh where Jonah had been sent was soon to become its capital. And so in chapter one verse one we read, Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amity, saying arise, go to Nineveh that great city and call out against it for their evil has come up before me.

[ 5 : 55 ] Now most of the Old Testament prophets were actually sent to God's people, not to other people to warn God's people about their disobedience and warn them of the consequences and call them back to worshipping God.

However, occasionally they were sent to other nations and it's clear that Nineveh was a pretty awful place because God says their evil had literally come up in his face.

It's like that stench. It's like it was just in his face. He had to do something about it. That's how evil Nineveh had gone. So he sends Jonah to call out against it so far.

So normal if you read any of the books of the prophets, but what comes next isn't verse three, but Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

God says go and Jonah says no. And isn't that just just an aside? Isn't that just a perfect summary of human sin? Like a toddler saying no to their parents, it's just like the first word they seem to learn.

[ 6 : 59 ] You're lucky he hasn't got there yet. But sin is just saying no to God. God tells us to do something and we say no. We do the opposite. And throughout human history from our first parents Adam and Eve, it's just been one long tracing the line of God telling humanity what to do and us saying no and fleeing and going in the opposite direction.

Now at this point we're not told why Jonah says no. If you want to read ahead, you can. You can find out if you get to chapter four, but we'll get there in time. We're not told why Jonah doesn't want to get to Nineveh.

What's highlighted though is just how much he really doesn't want to do what God says. God says go northeast to Nineveh. I'm thinking of that. God says go northeast to Nineveh.

And Jonah instead goes to Tarshish, which was the opposite direction, southwest, west, the opposite side of the Mediterranean, the opposite side of the known world. Jonah is doing all he can to get away from God.

And you see that again in the repetition that's in this passage. Three times Jonah, we're told that Jonah is going down to Tarshish. Just in case, you know, we didn't catch it the first time.

[ 8 : 08 ] Jonah is not going to Nineveh. He's going the opposite way. He's going to Tarshish. Twice we're told he's going away from the presence of the Lord. And throughout the verses, we're invited to trace his physical and his spiritual descent with the word down.

God says arise and go to Nineveh. What does Jonah do? He goes down to Joppa. He goes down to a boat. And in verse five, the captain finds him down in the innermost part of the ship.

Jonah's aim is to get away from God, to get as far away from he can as he can from this God that is telling him what to do when he doesn't want to do it, to get as far away from the presence of God. But the whole point of this story is just how ridiculous that is. And we're shown that with what's a bit like a slapstick comedy. You know, if they had cartoons at this point, they'd probably be sped up to double time and you'd have Jonah running around and God just standing there as he doesn't get any further away from him.

Think of Wiley Coates, I don't know, failed attempts to catch Roadrunner. But it's the comedy that we're meant to see as Jonah tries to get away from God. So God causes a great storm to come up on the sea.

[ 9 : 20 ] The sailors are afraid that they're going to perish. And here we get some great play on words. You've got God hurling a great wind into the sea. And what do the sailors do? They start hurling all the cargo overboard.

They don't know anything else to do. And then they start working through the telephone directory of all the gods they can think about, and they're all in each one hoping that one of them is going to save them.

And nothing's working. The ship's about to break up. And then some bright spark includes, well, maybe the gods aren't listening to us because someone's done something wrong. And so they cast lots and a lot falls on Jonah.

In verse 8 they say to Jonah, tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. And Jonah says, I am a Hebrew, I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea in the dry land.

And when the men, then the men were exceedingly afraid, and they 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.

[ 10 : 25 ] If you're planning on running away from God, can I suggest that you run away from a God who has limited territory and who has limited power, maybe the God just of a certain mountain or of a certain people, the kind that appears in mythology or in Hollywood.

If you've made the Greek God Poseidon angry, then you just got to stay away, you just got to get out of the water. You just got to stay away from the sea and you're fine. But Jonah stuffed.

Jonah doesn't stand a chance. The sailors know it. The sailors, from the beginning of the passage, they're pagan sailors. They don't know much about God. But pretty quickly, they realize, well, look, if he's the God of the land and the sea and he's the God of heaven, you can't run away from the presence of the Lord.

He's not restricted to one nation, to one place. He's the God who has made everything. And yet Jonah still tries. And so at this point, we've got to ask why?

Why does Jonah try to flee from God? Jonah said, he said, God's made the sea in the dry land. God claims to know that. And yet his actions just don't match in any way what he claims.

[ 11 : 33 ] Why did Jonah try to flee from the presence of God? I think, I don't think it's that Jonah didn't know that God was the king of everywhere, that God was both the Lord of the earth and all the Lord of the sea.

I think the problem is that Jonah is like you and me. What we believe doesn't always match our lives. We see this contradiction when Jonah says he fears the Lord and yet flees from him.

Now, the fear of the Lord isn't the fear of a tyrant or a bully. It's the reverent respect of God as our Creator, bowing to him as king of our lives.

The person who fears the Lord says, the fear of the Lord is saying, God, you're in charge. And yet Jonah doesn't do that, does he? This claims he fears the Lord, but doing what God wants is the last thing on Jonah's list.

And not too often we act like Jonah. We act in direct contradiction to what we claim to believe.

Maybe like Jonah, you claim to fear the Lord, to worship the God who made the sea in the dry land, but we have to ask, what does our week to week look like?

[ 12 : 45 ] Do we live as if God stays within these four walls as if God is just the God of 11 to 12 a.m. and then what six to seven p.m. Or do we live as if he's the God of the creation outlet there?

As we leave these doors, do we leave as if we're leaving God behind or as if we're going out into his kingdom, as if we're walking the space that he owns?

How big is your God? How big is his territory in your mind? Does his territory stretch into your home? Is he the one who's on the throne when you get down to work on a Monday?

See in charge of how you speak to people, how you relate to people. Even in the mundane, does God's territory stretch as far as how you talk over the phone when you're on hold and you're getting a bit fed up?

How you respond to the cashier, how you talk to your family in the car when they're being a pain or something like that? See, a true fear of the Lord is recognizing that God's territory is boundless and is not just all of creation, but all of our lives.

[13:55] True fear of the Lord isn't also about how many of God's commands you keep. You might think, okay, you fear the Lord. Okay, well, I fear the Lord. I could tick off all these commands that I keep.

It's about what it's not about. It's not about how many commands we keep. It's about who makes the commands in our life. As far as we know, Jonah had been a pretty obedient prophet, but then it just came down to one thing, didn't it?

Just came down to one thing that Jonah didn't like and he's off. God, you're in charge of all of this.

Okay, I'll be your prophet as long as it suits me, as long as what you say agrees with me.

You know, I'm happy to talk all about judgment and stuff for the people of Israel, but go to Nineveh and that's just one step too far. The thing is, we do that as well.

We say, look, okay, God, you can be in charge of all of these parts of my life, but this bit is reserved for me. You can be in charge of my work, but not my free time.

[14:56] You could be in charge of my money, but not my relationships. We say, look, God, this far and no further. The problem is when we're doing that, we're not actually, you can't actually call that fearing the Lord because we're putting ourselves in the place of God.

We're saying, look, God, you're in charge, but you're kind of in charge underneath me. You're in charge when I can say you're in charge. You're like my, I don't know, my deputy in charge. That's not a fear of the Lord.

A true fear of the Lord is saying that God is recognizing that God is the one who has made the sea and the dry land that it's submitting to him as king of every square inch of the land around us and every, the king of every square inch of our hearts and our lives.

It's true that none of us can do that perfectly. The Christian life is one of God gently challenging us of where we're still trying to keep control of where we're still saying this is my territory, not yours.

Christian life is one of God graciously calling us back to him, telling us to let back, let loose, to give control back to him. That's what we see God doing with Jonah, very graciously pursuing Jonah and calling him back.

[16:14] If we say we're following Jesus, king in our lives, we need to take a look in the mirror. We need to examine our hearts. Where might we be a bit like Jonah limiting God saying this far and no further.

Jonah claimed to fear God but fled. In contrast, let's look at the sailors who didn't know God but came to fear him. We're on our second point now, the sailors who feared.

They enter stage left in verse five and they're out of the story by the end of the chapter, but they made quite an impression in just a few verses that they are in this story.

Notice this, the first thing that we're told about the sailors and the last thing we're told about them is that they're afraid. The first one, verse five, we read the manner and are afraid and their first fear comes from the storm around us.

They find themselves in the biggest storm they have ever encountered. The biggest waves in Dalmore were looked tiny compared to this. I haven't been to see much but I've read enough books.

[17:17] Those of you who have been to see will know that, will be able to imagine in some ways what the sailors were going through. You'll be able to imagine the skies darkening, the swell increasing, the wind whipping through the rigging.

You can imagine as the waves start to ramp up higher and higher as the waves, as the sea sprays and crashes over the boat causing it to lurch, the timbers to creak. You can imagine as the ship ramps up onto the top of the wave, looking like a precipice as it shoots down, the brief spell of the gap in the wind, the calm as the wind dies down between the waves and then back up again just to repeat.

You can imagine the mast creaking almost about to snap, the sailors thinking this is one more second, two more seconds, we're going to be dead. The sailors would have been ribbons, the rigging would have just been stripped away.

We need to understand how utterly terrified, terrifying and hopeless this situation is because otherwise we won't understand the point of this chapter because by the end of the chapter they're even more afraid.

The scariest storm in their lives doesn't compare to how afraid they are at the end of the chapter. Verse 16, we read, then the men feared, they feared the Lord exceedingly.

[18:37] Literally they feared the Lord with great fear. When the Hebrew wants to emphasize something it just stacks up words. So instead of using another word like, well we do fear with exceedingly, it just says fear with great fear.

They feared the storm, they double feared God you might say. The God who can command the storm is far more terrifying than the storm. You just imagine you're down in Dalmore and imagine you're down in Dalmore and you're swimming in the sea and maybe you just get pulled out by that rip current.

You're pretty afraid. You find yourself being unable to swim across and get out of it and you're thinking what's going to happen? I'm not sure how long I can tread water and you're terrified. Then you see someone standing on the beach and they just shout. They shout, stop. And suddenly that the waves stop that rip current stops and it just starts pushing you back to the shore and you end up being deposited on the sand right in front of them.

Now what do you think you're going to find more scary? The rip current that takes you out or the person that just shouts stop and the waves bring you back in. That's the kind of situation we've got here with the sailors.

[19:48] The storm was scary. The God who holds the storm by a leash who molds the sea like Play-Doh. That's the God who's even more terrifying.

This is a story of Jonah's descent away from God, but at the same time it's a story of the sailors' journey towards God. The sailors go from fearing the storm to fearing the God who made the storm, the God of creation.

Let's just compare and contrast Jonah and the sailors for a moment. They start on opposite sides. He's a prophet of God. He's got this important position of speaking for God.

And what are we told about them? They're pagan sailors. They've got as many gods as the alphabet. I don't know which language they're to use, so I don't know how many that is. But the first thing we're told in verse 5 is that they're going through calling out to each one of their gods. By the end of this chapter they swap places. There's Jonah who's been cast into the sea in judgment, and it's the sailors who are on their knees worshipping God with awe and fear, realizing that for the first time who is the true God.

[20:58] Jonah really has no redeeming features. Some people try to say that when Jonah says, throw me in, he's actually just being a really nice guy and trying to sacrifice himself to save the sailors.

I think that's probably not the case. Jonah doesn't really care about their lives. He's quite happy to jump on this ship knowing that he's fleeing from the presence of the Lord. He's quite happy to stay asleep.

He only started talking when they told him to. I think it's more likely that Jonah says chuck me in the sea because when he realizes that he can't escape God geographically, he tries to escape God by dying.

On the other hand, the sailors truly fear God. They don't want to throw Jonah overboard. In fact, when Jonah says, throw me overboard, they do everything they can not to. They put their lives at risk growing back to shore.

Eventually when they do chuck him in, they pray that God will find them innocent. They pray that this is the last thing they want to do. It's an amazing contrast because on one hand you've got Jonah who knows so much about God and yet just guides that and fears God and flees.

[22:12] On the other hand, you've got the sailors who know barely anything, but just within a few minutes or however long that storm took, they find themselves.

They end up worshipping God. They end up fearing God. Maybe that's just a little helpful reminder that it's not about how much you know about God or about the Bible or whether how much you have come from or any of those things or what your life has looked like in the past.

True fear of God isn't about those things. It's about how we respond to God today. That's what we see with the sailors. They didn't know much, but when they saw who God was, when they saw that

he is the one who is the God of the universe, they knew they had no option but to bow down before him.

That storm at sea changed the sailors lives not because they almost died, but because there they met the true God. And they responded not fleeing, but fearing.

I think it's a good reminder for us. The only proper response to God is, is this kind of reverent, awesome fear before him as Lord of all.

[ 23 : 27 ] And God is God. He is the one who is created the world. He holds it in his hand. Everything happens according to his will.

First and foremost, we must bow before him as God and King. The sailors do that not by fleeing, but submitting to him as king of their lives.

Now, earlier on, I mentioned that the problem of us not letting God be in charge of all of our lives, setting limits for God. And I think part of the reason that we're arrogant enough to do that is that we're arrogant enough to put boundaries in our hearts to say, God, this far and no further, is that we forget that God is the same awesome and majestic and terrifying God that the sailors and Jonah encountered.

Instead, we tend to domesticate God. We prefer to think maybe of Jesus, Jesus in the manger, gentle Jesus, small and kind, rather than the God who throws up storms and quiets them in just a second.

And maybe that's because a small God only makes small demands on our lives. It's much easier to ignore God's commands if he stays in the manger than a God who is King and who is all powerful and who is the ruler of creation.

[ 24 : 46 ] Now, Jesus is wonderfully gentle and compassionate. All those things are true about him. But if we focus only on that, we'll get a lopsided view of God.

If we think of that in exclusion to God being King, we haven't truly understood who Jesus is. And when the apostle John has a vision of God in Revelation, he falls, he of Jesus in Revelation.

What does he do? He falls on his feet as though dead. This is John who knew Jesus, who walked with him. But when God's, when John sees the glorified Jesus Christ, he knows the only proper response is worship, is bound down to Jesus as King.

God is the Bible who spoke the world into existence, who keeps upholding it by his word. I don't know whether you've seen, right now I'm enjoying watching shepherds herd their sheep with their dogs.

And, you know, when the dogs are behaving, it just looks so effortless. They just whistle something. I don't know what they whistle, a magic tune. And the dogs just go and do what they want.

[ 25 : 53 ] And they round up the sheep and they lie down and they move around and they're perfectly behaved. That's the kind of, maybe that can be just a small picture, small illustration of the kind of power God has.

God just speaks and it happens. The waves will lie down. The mountains rise up. Life comes from nothing.

That's the kind of God we have. We must bow before him because he's in charge. If one mistake is to not fear God as the sovereign creator, the other is to think that fear in God means that we put him at arm's length.

That God is powerful but not relational. That God is like, I don't know, an angry head teacher rather than the father that Jesus says he is. We fear God like the sea, like an impersonal force.

But God is personal. And that's the other thing we see in this passage. Not only this chapter, not only shows us God's sovereignty, it shows us his compassion, his personal compassion for people like you and me.

[ 26 : 56 ] You see, look at these pagan sailors again. They've got nothing going for them. Do they? They worship any God in every God. Whoever, they're pretty mercenary. Whoever's going to help them out in the situation.

Like all of us by nature, they deserve nothing but God's judgment. That's all of us. And yet what does God do? He spares them from the storm.

But more than that. He sends them a prophet. Do you notice that? These sailors who come back and forth from the Mediterranean all their lives, what does God do?

He sends them one of his prophets. Maybe Jonah didn't expect that his life would be that way. But God is so in control, so sovereign that he can even use the running away of a prophet to stick that,

to stick them in the sailors' lives so that he can reveal his power and so that the sailors realize who he is and he can save the sailors.

I just think that's pretty awesome. God is so in control, he can do that. And he also cares about those sailors that he's going to use a runaway prophet to save them.

[ 28 : 02 ] He has compassion on them. He doesn't just save them from the sea. He brings them to himself to the point where they're sacrificing to him. Just think, verse 14, we've got the Lord in capital letters.

That's God's covenant name. They go from knowing nothing to calling out to God as their covenant God, oh Lord, let us not perish from this man's life and worshiping God.

I don't know. Maybe in the new creation we'll meet them. We'll see if that, if their confession was genuine. That would be pretty cool. You can ask them what it was like. God is sovereign and compassionate.

These are two things that we can't separate. And it's another storm 800 years later that after Jonah that we see those two attributes once again so clearly. I meant to have us read Mark 4, but I forgot. But in Mark 4 once again we see some seasoned sailors who are utterly terrified. There's a storm is going on. The disciples are at their wits end.

[ 29 : 05 ] What's going to happen? And they say, and there's again, once again, there's a man asleep in the boat. And they wake him up and say, teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? Surely Jesus is not like Jonah.

He doesn't just say, chuck me overboard. No, he stands up and says, peace be still. He stills the seas. And then he says to the disciples, why are you so afraid?

Do you still have no faith? Because they are filled with great fear and said to one another, who is this? That even the wind and the sea obey him.

In Jesus we see God's sovereignty and God's compassion perfectly displayed. In his sovereignty, he commands the storms to cease. One word, that's all it takes. The disciples were afraid of the storm.

They were terrified when they realized who Jesus could control the storm. They thought, we've been walking around this guy the whole time. We didn't even realize.

[ 29 : 59 ] But you can't just pass Jesus off. He's not just a man. The disciples realized at that point that he was the God of creation. He's the Lord of heaven and earth.

But that sovereignty is also interwoven with compassion. He said, they say, do you not care if we drown? Of course Jesus does.

That's why he stills the storm. Yes, God absolutely cares. He calms the storm. He saves the disciples' lives. And that's just a little picture, a small picture of what Jesus will go on to do a few months later.

When he saves not their lives from the storm, but he saves them for eternity on the cross. Brothers and sisters, the story of Jonah challenges us that our God is too small.

It challenges us not to put God in a box where we think we can control God or we think we can set limits for God. He's the Lord of all creation to whom we must bow.

[ 31 : 02 ] But the majestic God has stooped. He has made himself known in the person of Jesus Christ. We can know the God who is the Lord of all creation because he has come into this world in the person of Jesus Christ.

He demands all of our lives, not just part of our lives, but he's also bought our lives for himself through his death on the cross so that we can be his.

This is the God who is supremely sovereign, but compassionate enough not to just leave us to the side, but to bring us to us himself, to save us from himself.

Let's pray.