

Jonah 1:4–16 God sends a great storm

VOTC # 2 August 2021

Hello dear listeners,

Jonah is on the run. He doesn't want to go to Nineveh. He doesn't want God to spare the Ninevites. Jonah wants a God of his own making, a God who simply smites the bad people and blesses the good people. But when the real God shows up, Jonah flees from his presence. He boards a ship with a destination as far away as possible from where the Lord called him to be.

But here is where grace becomes the most exquisite: God pursues his own. Those who by faith in Christ become children of the God of grace and yet falter are those whose trip won't end in a train wreck. God's Word calls you to recognize God's pursuing grace in the storm of sin, and our continual need to throw ourselves upon heaven's mercy

Jonah 1:4 reads, "But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea." This is one nasty storm. The sea turns into a mighty tempest, and is so savage that the ship threatened to break apart. The storm had such a ferocity that, according to verse 5, these mariners, who wouldn't grow uneasy at the first sight of foul weather, were *afraid*. Each cries out to his own god. And in their desperation, they even begin to jettison their cargo! That's quite something. We have here not only a natural disaster, but also an *economic* disaster! They had to get these goods from one place to another. So these sailors lose not only their possessions, but also their profits!

Not all on board, however, are frantic. The wind howls, the waves crash, the ship is threatening to break up, the sailors are reeling. What's Jonah doing? Nothing. He's gone down into the hold of the ship, and fallen fast asleep. Face to face with the reality of the Lord's judgment, Jonah preferred to continue to hide from God.

And even when the ship's captain wakes him up and upbraids him, Jonah still does nothing. Verse 6: "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." No response. It's a prophet's job to intercede for people! But the last thing Jonah wanted was to bring himself to the Lord's attention.

What we see happening here is that Jonah's sin leads him downward and inward. Jonah's physical movements downward symbolically parallel his spiritual journey away from the Lord. And that journey also takes him inwards, away from people and also God.

For the truth is, every sin has a storm attached to it. That's not saying that every difficulty you experience is the result of a particular sin—but the Bible *does* teach that every sin will bring you into

difficulty. Sin *always* locks you in the prison of your own defensiveness and self-justification, and eats you up slowly from the inside. All sin has a storm attached to it.

God is long-suffering, but Jonah's experience reminds us that God's holiness demands we repent of sins. God knows exactly where you are, and will meet you where you are.

In response to the raging sea, the pagan sailors sought desperately to understand its cause. They believed, and in this case quite rightly, that such a disaster must be the work of some god who had been offended by human sin. So they say, verse 7, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." Casting lots was an ancient ritual performed to discern the will of the gods. These pagan sailors believed that some god controlled events or determined the course of ships. So they throw these lots to get some help to resolve their dilemma. The cast lot led to Jonah.

And yet they don't panic. Instead, they turn to him for information. They pepper him with questions. "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?" Their urgent goal is to understand the God who had been angered, so they can determine what they should do. They are actually giving him opportunity to confess his sin and identify his God.

And so Jonah finally speaks. "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." This is all Jonah says. But it's more than enough to terrify the sailors. They were shocked! They were trying to find out what local, territorial deity they had offended. And though in their ears this was a territorial deity, they understand it as a big one.

Yet we have to pay attention to what's left unsaid. This description rightly left them afraid, *partly because* Jonah doesn't pass on the other side of the story. Jonah is a preacher of the gospel. But he doesn't sound like one. To the sailors, he has spoken of the might of God. But he doesn't tell them that this is a God of love and compassion. He's really only answering the sailors on their terms. All the sailors know is that this is a god *worth* running away from because he's so powerful. Jonah's words are true, but incomplete.

Has it happened that you have let opportunities slip through your fingers to get to the heart of your faith? God is not just a God who is sovereign over all things, as awesome as that is. God is also a God of grace. He's a God who is not above pursuing people. He's a God who forgives. Yet how often do we give people an incomplete picture of our God? Let your words, your attitudes, your actions, indicate what is the God of heaven and earth is all about.

The sailors ask Jonah, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" It becomes evident now that Jonah's flight from the Lord is not going to be successful. But there's no hint of any attempt on his part to repent of his sin. Instead, his logic is very simple: I've broken the law; I deserve

to die. Verse 12: “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you.” Jonah has no desire to receive the mercy of the Lord.

What happens next is rather remarkable. These pagan sailors had very little to thank him for, since the storm was his fault, as he also admits. All Jonah had ever done for them was bring trouble. But they don’t follow his wishes. Instead, they row harder.

But their actions fail. God causes the sea to grow even wilder than before. And so as they prepared to bring about Jonah’s wish, they prayed to the LORD. Verse 14, “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 you pleased.” And then they “picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.” And then, awestruck, these pagan sailors now feared the LORD exceedingly, says verse 16. They offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him. They were transformed by their encounter with Jonah, and especially with Jonah’s God.

For Jonah, however, the LORD gives him over to his wishes. The bottom of the sea is as good a place as any to try and flee from God. The water becomes Jonah’s “death,” since he doesn’t know that a fish is going to catch him.

Jonah’s “death” looks both backward and forward. Looking back, Jonah plays the same role as the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. The high priest would bring two live goats, and cast lots over them. One goat would be singled out to die, while the other would be driven out to the wilderness. Those scapegoats bear the sins of the community and atone for those sins by death and by banishment into the wilderness. Well in a similar way, Jonah takes a journey into the outer darkness, and is singled out by a lot to die in order to avert God’s wrath and save the sailors. Jonah was a sort of scapegoat for the deliverance of the sailors. A very imperfect scapegoat.

But his “death” looks forward, finding its ultimate fulfillment in the death of Jesus Christ, the true scapegoat. The spotless substitute, who freely takes the role of *both* goats—dying for our sin, and bearing the separation from God that sin always brings.

And Christ never ran from that. In fact, he was in full control of discharging the duties of his office. Remember that he too once slept on a storm-battered boat. But this storm was not the result of Jesus’ rebellion, nor was he hiding from people as he slept. He slept in the peace of his sovereign might. So when he awakes, he does not pray to God to calm the storm. No, he speaks directly to the storm and stills it with a word! He’s not just a prophet. He’s God himself. And that heightens the intensity of the other occasion where we see Jesus facing a storm, in the Garden of Gethsemane. The oncoming storm of God’s fearsome wrath was not related to his sin, but to ours. So he had every right to run away from that assignment. But he didn’t. Instead, he bowed his head and said, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

Jonah preferred to die *rather* than say yes to God's will.

Surely you also have found yourself unwilling to say to the Lord, "Not my will, but yours be done." But you see, Jesus was willing to die as a *result* of saying, "Not my will be done." Instead of stilling that storm, Jesus went into the heart of it. So that salvation could flow from the Lord to rebellious runaways like us!

This is the love that woos you out of rebellion. There's no reason to run from God. There is only room for crying out to Jesus. You can never outrun him. Instead, when you run as far as you can, you will find that he has run further, and is waiting there to greet you, and show you the grace you have resisted. To welcome you into his safe harbor in Christ. Rest in him.