

Jonah: *The Storm of God's Pursuit*
Jonah 1:4-6
2/25/2024

As we return to the story of Jonah, we must picture Jonah, formerly a prophet and a man of God, now in a place many of us know all too well...Jonah is on the run from God. He has chosen the path of disobedience because he refuses to obey God's call to cry out against the pagan city of Nineveh. In Jonah's rebellious mind, the safest place is now "away from the presence of the Lord." Jonah will soon discover that his best thinking cannot be trusted.

Let us stand and read what comes next in Jonah 1:4-6:

4 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. 5 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 inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. 6 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."

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Unintended, Yet Inevitable Consequence of Sin; 2) God's Grace in the Storm; and 3) An Ironic and Convicting Contrast.

I. The Unintended, Yet Inevitable Consequence of Sin

Here is a truth that needs little explanation...it is a truth that we all know well enough from our personal experience: "Every act of disobedience to God has a storm attached to it."¹

When we read the book of Proverbs, we see this truth stated over and over again. Proverbs 28:14 states, "Blessed is the one who fears the LORD always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity." Again, Proverbs 13:13 states, "Whoever despises the Word brings destruction on himself." We all understand cause and effect. When we are indifferent to our bodies and pay no attention to our diet and exercise, we know that sooner or later our bodies are going to make us pay for those choices. Heart disease, diabetes, and even some forms of cancer are predictable consequences of neglect for our bodies. The same is true in our relationships. Neglect spending time with your children or your spouse, and you will soon find yourself alienated from your own family and divorced. Neglect investing in friendships, and you'll eventually have no friends at all. What we observe in the natural world points to what is always true in the spiritual world. Our choices have spiritual, eternal consequences. Every act of disobedience to God has a storm attached to it.

But it's worse than that. Here's another truth that we find so powerfully illustrated in our story this morning, and it's stated clearly in Proverbs 13:20, "The companion of fools will suffer harm."

The effect of those storms attached to our disobedience is not limited to our own personal consequence. Others suffer harm because of our sinful choices, and that is the often unintended but always inevitable consequence of sin.

A man who gives himself over to alcohol poisons not only himself, but he brings inevitable disgrace, humiliation, and anxiety upon his wife and children as well. When he

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet*, p. 24.

chooses to drive under the influence, it's not just his life that he puts at risk, but the innocent lives of countless others who may end up injured or dead because of his disobedience against God. When the large company's CEO makes unethical decisions that are an offense to God in the way that he wastes the company's dollars and compromises the company's product, his sinful decisions not only lead to his termination, but the whole company suffers when profits fall and thousands of employees lose their jobs. When the Senior Pastor cowers away from telling the truth and calling leaders to account out of fear of offense, the whole congregation suffers. Even worse, when the Pastor fails to warn people of the consequence of their sin, he has led people astray...leading them to think they have peace with God when there is no peace. The eternal consequences for generations to come will be devastating because that's how sin works. The storm attached to our sin affects many, and that is exactly what we observe in our text this morning.

Jonah's selfish, stubborn, cowardly refusal to obey God's call to Nineveh leads to predictable and painful consequences for himself and others, but not necessarily in that order. We read in vs. 4, "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." There's a lot to notice here.

First, notice how perfectly this story is told. If we were to make this story into a movie, we would first see Jonah climb aboard the ship to Tarshish on a beautiful day in Joppa. The ship's crew would welcome the stranger aboard with good natured greetings as they busily went about their final preparations. We would zoom in on the ship's captain as he confers with his best meteorologist, both agreeing that the weather was in their favor. We learn that this seasoned crew would never set out for the distant shores of Tarshish unless it was the perfect season with favorable winds for the journey. We would then watch as the crew sets sail, the noble vessel pointed towards the setting sun. Yet the unsettling music suggests that God is not going to ignore the disobedient prophet who we watch quietly disappear below deck, eager to avoid interaction with people...eager to flee from the presence of the Lord. As the scene begins to close, the camera begins to lift further and further up into the heavens, just far enough for us to see what lay beyond the horizon. And there it is, just out of sight from the unsuspecting sailors--the tell-tale cloud formation of a fierce hurricane, growing by the second in lethal intensity. The scene closes with a certain sense of foreboding: the justice of God awaits the disobedient prophet, placing everyone on board in harm's way.

The next scene begins the following morning with a horrifying shot of that massive cloud formation, lightning flashing, thunder roaring. We zoom in to behold the massive swells of an angry sea towering over what now appears to be a miniature toy boat. As we zoom in on the boat itself, we watch as the hull bends and moans under the pressure of the waves. We can hear the main mast of the ship creak and begin to crack under the strain of heavy winds. There can be little doubt: this ship is just minutes away from destruction. The next shot is of the captain shouting orders, desperate to be heard over the crashing waves and the roaring winds. He commands the crew to hurl their precious cargo into the sea. Nothing is spared. They will

forfeit their profit; they will jettison their weapons; even their food rations will be lost in a desperate attempt to make the ship as buoyant as possible. The captain's expression is brave. He is not new to the dangers of the open sea; but we note in his expression, and that of the crew, that this is no ordinary storm. The seasoned sailors are afraid. We can see from the way that they look at each other...there is nothing they can do now that will save them from this storm. They begin shouting to each other as they work, "This storm is unnatural. There has never been such a storm in the dry season. It is the work of an angry god. But whose god?"

We watch as, one by one, the crew members fall to their knees, each crying out to his tribal god, each praying in his native tongue. However, we quickly learn what they already know: this storm is greater than any of their tribal gods. Whatever god might be responsible, it is an unknown god...a god that is greater than all their tribal gods put together.² It's at this moment that the captain remembers the strange man who boarded just hours before their departure. The stranger paid a generous sum to ride along, but he has not been seen on the deck since the storm set upon them. The camera then leads us down the hatch, into the cargo hold, where amazingly, we find Jonah swinging in a hammock, fast asleep³...apparently oblivious to the storm that his disobedience has inflicted upon his shipmates.

Church, I hope you can appreciate the masterful telling of this story. It's powerful and dramatic to imagine, but there's also a ton of meaning in the words that are used to tell the story.

For example, we read in vs. 4 that "the LORD hurled a great *rûah* upon the sea". The Hebrew word *rûah* has multiple meanings, and that's important if we are to understand how the ancients would have heard this story. Remember that it was the *rûah* of God that swept across the waters in the creation story. *Rûah* can mean wind, but it also points to the spirit of God at work.⁴ The use of *rûah* leaves no doubt in the ancient mind that this storm is God's doing. There is more at work here than normal weather patterns. God has sent this storm upon the waters to accomplish His purposes.

Note also the ironic and repetitive use of the adjective "great." Jonah refused to face the dangers of that "great city" called Nineveh, but his disobedience will now require him to face the "great winds" and the "great" tempest at sea. Obedience may at first seem like a dangerous option for those called by God to do hard things, but this powerful storm reminds us that disobedience is always far more dangerous than obedience.

Note as well the absolute sovereignty of God in this story. If Jonah will not listen to God's voice in the context of prayer, God will raise the volume by speaking through other means

² Youngblood writes: "Realizing that personalized deities were incapable of producing such a storm, the mariners were seeking information and intercession. They were asking their gods which cosmic deity was behind the storm and requesting their personal deities intercede with that god on their behalf" p. 76.

³ The Septuagint suggests that the captain may only have found him because he was snoring! See Sinclair Ferguson [Man Overboard: The Story of Jonah](#), p. 23.

⁴ See Rosemary Nixon's [The Message of Jonah](#), p. 85 for a wonderful treatment of this subject. There she writes, "The *rûah* of God is associated with bringing order out of chaos, life out of death and justice in place of wickedness. In His work of creation and redemption, God uses *rûah* to bring Jonah to his senses."

that are at His disposal! God speaks first through the natural order...through the winds and the waves. God even expresses His judgement against Jonah's disobedience through the ship itself that is personified in the story.⁵ The text literally suggests that the ship is threatening Jonah and the crew that it will break up if Jonah refuses to repent and change course. But God doesn't stop there. God speaks directly to Jonah through the pagan captain of the ship, did you notice that? Listen to what the captain says when he discovers Jonah asleep in the cargo hold: "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

Did you notice any familiar words spoken by the captain? "Arise! Cry out..." The pagan captain literally uses the exact same words first spoken to Jonah by God to awaken Jonah from his sin-sick slumber. Think about that, Church. Here was Jonah, running from God. He was now many miles away from God's chosen land and God's chosen people and his former life as God's prophet. He has been in an unnatural sleep now for hours, likely deep into a disturbing dream unlike any dream he had ever experienced, when suddenly he wakes up to a commanding voice speaking the exact words he had been running from, "Arise! Cry out...!"

God is relentless in His pursuit of those He has called. He is not about to let the disobedience of one man thwart His mission to show mercy upon Nineveh. God pursues Jonah. He confronts Jonah in the storm, in the ship, and in the words of the pagan captain.

And what does Jonah say in response to God's pursuit? Nothing...nothing at all. We'll make some observations about Jonah's response in just a minute; but first, let us consider our second subheading.

II. God's Grace in the Storm

One of the most concerning things I hear somewhat regularly from church-going people is this: "God is harsh and brutal in the Old Testament; but I like that God is kind and forgiving in the New Testament."

Church, Hebrews 13:8 makes it clear that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God's nature does not change from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The consistent witness of scripture is that God is perfectly loving, which means that God is perfectly just and perfectly merciful. We've touched on this theme already, but here we find yet another perfect example of this inevitable tension.

God is perfectly *just* in sending a storm upon the sea in response to Jonah's blatant disobedience, right? Sin always has a storm attached to it. As Paul writes in Romans 6, "The penalty for sin is death." God is nothing less than *just* if He destroys Jonah for his sin of rebellion. Even so, we must also observe that God is perfectly *merciful* in sending a storm upon the sea in response to Jonah's disobedience. Why? Because the severe mercy of God in the storm will often lead sinful souls to repent, and repentance leads to salvation.

⁵ See Kevin J. Youngblood's [Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament](#): Jonah, p. 75.

Think about it for a moment. What is God's intent? Is God attempting to wipe out Jonah as punishment for his sins by sending a raging storm upon the sea? No. God doesn't need a storm at sea to wipe out sinful people. The storm is ultimately an expression of God's mercy. The storm ensures that Jonah will experience the natural consequences of his disobedience. Those natural consequences...the storm and the consequent suffering...can and will eventually serve God's purposes to change Jonah's heart. In other words, the purpose of the storm is to help Jonah see the very real consequence of his sin so that he might accept responsibility for his sinful choices and repent. If Jonah repents, we know that God will be quick to extend mercy. God's justice and God's mercy are consistently presented as inextricably intertwined throughout the Old and New Testament, and this storm is no exception.

Now, before we move on, we must be careful to avoid making wrong conclusions. First, we must not associate every storm in our lives as the consequence of some sin that we've committed against God. Not all storms and seasons of suffering are the direct consequence of our disobedience. Much of the suffering we endure in life comes from the sinful choices of others or simply due to the fact that all creation suffers under the curse of sin. So, it would be wrong to assume that all storms...all seasons of suffering...are always a product of our disobedience. It is accurate to say, however, that all acts of disobedience come with storms attached! In other words, we should not think that we can blatantly rebel against God without consequence. That's the point here.

Secondly, we must not assume that living an obedient life will lead to a storm-free existence. The scriptures do not suggest that we will lead storm-free lives if we are obedient to God...not at all. The book of Job stands as a very strong critique to that wrong way of thinking, as does the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Job was a righteous man who suffered unthinkable loss. Jesus lived a perfectly obedient life, but He certainly did not live a storm-free life...neither will we.

Third, we must remember that there is no storm in life that can extend beyond the boundaries of God's sovereignty. No matter how desperate our situation, no matter how intense our suffering may be, God's grace will pursue us in every storm. Romans 8:28 is such a powerful promise when Paul writes, "And we know that God works in all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to His purpose." God is working for the good of Jonah even in the midst of this horrific storm. And, as we shall see next week, God is working for the good of the pagan sailors as well! God is always pursuing us with His grace, even through the fiercest storm. Tim Keller writes:

As hard as it is to discern God's loving and wise purposes behind many of our trials and difficulties, it would be even more hopeless to imagine that he has no control over them or that our sufferings are random and meaningless. We, living on this side of the cross, know that God can save through weakness, suffering and apparent defeat. Those who watched Jesus dying saw nothing but loss and tragedy. Yet at the heart of that darkness the divine mercy was powerfully at work, bringing about pardon and forgiveness for us. God's salvation came into the world through suffering, so his saving grace and power can work in our lives more and more as we go through difficulty and sorrow. There's mercy deep inside our storms.⁶

⁶ Keller, p. 30.

III. An Ironic and Convicting Contrast

Now, allow me to transition from preaching to meddling! I'm sure you've already picked up on the fact that there is tremendous irony all over this story of Jonah. But, in case you've missed it, please allow me to point a few things out to you.

First of all, pay very close attention to the pagan sailors on deck. In fact, we should probably go so far as to identify these men as those whom we typically love to hate. These are people far from the one true God in terms of their belief systems. These men worship gods who are not gods; they lack solid theology; they are biblically ignorant; and we would likely be appalled by their moral choices in terms of their sex life and their consumption of alcohol. These are sailing men...they are famously rough and tumble in nature. For a contemporary American, evangelical audience, we might think of these men as radical Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or Communists or Nazis or God-forbid, Patriots fans! We must come to the text with a prior bias against these men because the ancient Jewish audience definitely had that bias. These men on the deck are the epitome of religious and political outsiders. You won't grasp or appreciate the irony of this story if you do not envision the men on deck as the those you would assume are outside of God's grace and election based upon their lifestyle, doctrine and political associations.

Do you have that bias in mind? Can you muster up some serious contempt for these men? OK, now, notice how the contemptuous outsiders respond in the midst of the storm. First of all, the outsiders band together for the common good. Even though these men come from different nations and worship different gods, they all pitch in, they all sacrifice their personal belongings, they all work feverishly to save the ship and everyone on it. Meanwhile, "the man of God," the only person on the ship with an accurate biblical worldview, does nothing. Now, it's possible that Jonah is unaware of the storm that is about to destroy the ship and everyone aboard, but it's also possible that Jonah is perfectly aware of the storm and is simply resigned to his fate. In his selfishness, he simply doesn't care what becomes of the pagans or their ship. We don't know for a fact what is currently motivating Jonah to go on napping in the midst of the perfect storm. What we do know is what we can observe in terms of action: the pagan outsiders jump into action for the common good whereas the representative of God's people does nothing.

Church, there is nothing gained when those who have accurate theology and a biblical worldview do nothing in light of human suffering and crisis. In the end, we will be rightly judged by the watching world by what we did...or what we failed to do...not by what we believe to be true about the Bible. Do you know who picked up on this irony in the story of Jonah? Jesus did. I think it's quite likely that the parable Jesus tells of the Good Samaritan was at least partly inspired by this ironic observation in the story of Jonah. Like these pagan sailors, the Samaritan was an outsider who showed mercy to a man in need...a man who was considered his enemy...a man who was from a people who had caused the Samaritans a great deal of suffering...and yet the Samaritan engages with mercy when the good religious insiders pass by and do nothing.

Church, make no mistake: the story of Jonah is a critique of good, religious people who lack mercy for those they consider to be 'outsiders.' I'll come back to that point in a second.

Next, let us observe what the religious/political outsiders do when confronted by the storm. First of all, the sailors immediately think theologically. They assume there is a higher power at work, and they also assume that this storm is probably their fault! Each sailor begins to repent to his own god...in other words, they pray! This is precisely the behavior that God anticipates when He pursues His people through storms. Storms should lead to self-examination, repentance, and prayer. Storms should strip us of our dependencies on technology, entertainment, financial security, or our own abilities to save ourselves. Again, this is exactly what we observe in the religious/political outsiders. They may not know who God is, but they still bear God's image; so, when the storm comes, they do what God's image-bearers do...they cry out to God. They pray, they take responsibility, they repent, and they know that the only way they are going to survive the storm is through faith in a god who, though just, might "give a thought to us that we may not perish."

Meanwhile, the man of God, to the best of our knowledge, never prays. Even after the captain directly confronts Jonah, commanding him to arise and to cry out to his God for the sake of the common good, Jonah refuses. Jonah remains silent when it is in the best interest of every person on that boat for Jonah to call on the name of the One True God.

Quick question: do you think Jonah would have remained silent if his wife and children were traveling with him? Do you think he might have jumped up and prayed his tail off in an attempt to save the ones he loved? You bet...of course he would. You see, Jonah doesn't pray because Jonah doesn't care about these men. He doesn't even care about himself. He would rather die than do anything that might bless or save the enemies of Israel. Church, who do you pray for? Who do you NOT pray for?

As much as it hurts, we must let the irony of Jonah's story cut deep into our hearts and do its work. There are tremendous dangers that predictably accompany those who consider themselves to be the religious insiders. Jonah's idolatrous nationalism left him void of mercy for those he considered to be on the outside of God's favor and election. Ironically, those very souls he so despised are the now the very men working feverishly to save Jonah's life. The outsiders are responding powerfully to the justice and mercy of God in the storm, and we'll see later that they end up turning their hearts to God, making sacrifices to and worshipping the One True God.

So, what about Jonah? What *is* his problem? How can he sleep and do nothing in the midst of crisis and human suffering?

One of my favorite resources on Jonah is a commentary written by a woman named Rosemary Nixon. She serves as a pastor of the Durham Cathedral in London, and in my opinion, Nixon has written one of the most thorough and thoughtful works on the subject of Jonah. In her commentary, Rosemary Nixon comes right out and says what none of us want to hear, but what we all need to hear:

Jonah's sleep is the sleep of the church at a time when those outside are struggling for salvation...or the sleep of high-minded Christians who are principled and embracing high ideals of acceptance, justice, truth and love, who yet harbor racism, classism, sexism, prejudice, and inequality in their very lifestyles. Being fast asleep to all but our own

self-interests, we church people can sometimes be blind and deaf to the cries of many whose lives are no more than a grim struggle for survival. We may complacently espouse high moral and spiritual ideals without ever realizing our own human solidarity with others who struggle. We may even, from a comfortable distance, blame others for not being good, or diligent, or intelligent enough to seek these ideals. We may even believe ourselves to be in a tiny minority of good, faithful people, tempted to say, 'I, even I only am left', being all but blind to the thousands who call on God in their time of need. Some, unlike the Jonahs in the church, thankfully do expose themselves to God's uncomfortable countercultural call...⁷

Church, I know that hurts, but this little story of Jonah is not intended to make us feel great about ourselves. It's a wakeup call to God's people. God has His heart set on Nineveh, and He has called us to speak the truth to a lost and perishing world. God loves that motley crew on the deck of a sinking ship, and He has placed us on that ship that we might bear witness to the One, True God in our prayers and in our service. As those entrusted with His Word, called to be a light in the midst of this present darkness, it is no time for us to be sleeping below while the storm is raging all around us. As the people who live near us, attend our schools, and work in our companies are crying out in desperation for salvation, it is no time for us to remain silent.

OK, now that we all have our feelings hurt, we'll stop here and pick up the narrative next time. As we close, let me once again point you to Jesus. You might recall that Jesus also slept peacefully in the midst of a storm at sea, but Jesus slept for a different reason. Jesus did not sleep to escape God's call; Jesus slept because He had absolute faith in God's call, no matter how the storm raged around Him. When the disciples freaked out in the storm, Jesus asked, "Where is your faith?" Then Jesus rebuked the storm, and the waters were stilled.

Church, the good news of the Gospel is that Jesus is in the storm with us, so we have nothing to fear. Jesus is with us, and Jesus is sufficient. Jesus endured the cross so that the insiders and the outsiders would come to know God's unmerited grace through the power of His forgiveness. And because we have been forgiven when we didn't deserve to be forgiven...because God rescued us when we didn't deserve to be rescued...it is incumbent upon the Lord's Church to love, serve, pray for, bear witness to and bless the "undeserving" that we encounter every day. Jesus showed us a better way. Jesus is the Good Samaritan that saved us all. He showed us mercy when we were broken and left for dead. Now go and do likewise for those to whom God has called you to serve. Let us pray.

⁷ Nixon, pp. 90-91.