

Jonah: *Substitutionary Love*  
Jonah 1:10-16

As we return to our journey through Jonah, the storm of Jonah's disobedience has created a crisis for everyone aboard his ship. Having cried out to their gods and lightened the ship of its cargo, the heathen sailors resort to casting lots to determine the cause of the storm that now threatens to break up at any minute. When the lots land on Jonah, the sailors ask Jonah a series of questions, trying to determine which god or gods Jonah has angered. Finally, in vs. 9, Jonah speaks and states, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." We're going to pick up the narrative there and see what happens next. Please stand as we read Jonah 1:10-16: 10 Then the men were exceedingly afraid and 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. 11 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. 12 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." 13 Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. 14 Therefore they called out to the Lord, "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 it pleased you." 15 So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

My message will fall under three subheadings this morning: 1) The Fear of the Lord; 2) Salvation Through Judgment; and 3) Substitutionary Love;

### **I. The Fear of the Lord**

Jonah's nationalistic commitments and his disdain for those he considers to be a threat to his people have led him to behave in a way that is completely inconsistent with the teachings of scripture. Like many people who call themselves Christians today, Jonah is angry, proud, self-absorbed, oblivious to the needs of others, and unapologetically in rebellion against the very God he claims to "fear". Jonah wants nothing to do with God's mission to show mercy upon the enemy of Israel, so he is on the run from God. Ironically, he ends up on a boat with a bunch of heathen who seem to have more common sense and a greater respect for God than he does—which makes this story both humorous and cringeworthy at the same time.

Jonah's recent revelation wreaks of tremendous irony when he states in vs. 9, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." We learn in vs. 10 that Jonah then goes on to tell the sailors that he is on the run from the very God that he claims to fear. Jonah's hypocrisy does not go unnoticed by the ship's crew. Upon hearing his statement, we can almost see the faces of the heathen sailors as they look at each other with raised eyebrows. How can this man claim to fear his God when he is obviously engaged in abject rebellion against that same God? And what was he thinking when he got on *their* boat knowing full well that this angry God was in hot pursuit? Jonah's disregard for his own God, as well as his contempt for everyone else on board, has caused this ship and her crew to be minutes away from destruction.

In vs. 10 we read: Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!"

Church, who do you think actually fears God in this story so far? Jonah, or the heathen?

OT scholar, Dr. Kevin Youngblood, writes: The term “fear” functions as a catch word, serving to juxtapose Jonah’s fear and the mariner’s fear. Jonah’s claim is ironic in light of his defiant flight from YHWH’s presence. His version of fear stands in stark contrast to the mariner’s evolving fear that leads to greater and greater obedience. The basic verb that describes Jonah’s fear pales in comparison to the description of the mariners’ intense reverence.<sup>1</sup>

Here’s another bit of irony: the phrase “What is this that you have done?” occurs five other times in the Hebrew Bible. The first is in Genesis 3:13 when God asks Eve, “What is this that you have done?” after she had eaten the forbidden fruit. The second time those words are spoken by Pharaoh when he discovers that Abraham lied when he told the Egyptian king that Sarai was his sister in Genesis 12:18. Because of Abraham’s dishonesty, God had afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues when Pharaoh unknowingly took Sarai as his wife. The third time we find this phrase is in Genesis 26 when Abimelech, king of the Philistines, discovers that Isaac had lied and said that his wife Rebekah was his sister. The fourth time is in Genesis 29 when Jacob discovers that Laban had snuck his daughter Leah into Jacob’s wedding bed instead of her sister, Rachel...which was awkward! Finally, the phrase is used in Exodus 14:11 when the Israelites are complaining that Moses misled them into believing that they were fleeing Egypt to go to a land of milk and honey when it appeared that they were about to be destroyed by Pharaoh and his army at the shore of the Red Sea.

In every instance, the phrase, “What is this that you have done?” suggests that someone has sinned or lied in an egregious manner. The phrase clearly assumes that someone was knowingly deceptive. In two of the five instances, the phrase is spoken by a Gentile who is rebuking the man of God who blatantly lied, and I think that’s very much the tone here as the sailors confront Jonah. As far as the sailors are concerned, Jonah has been deceptive about his identity and his horrible sin against the God of heaven, maker of the sea and dry land. And now, the sailors are horrified...they actually fear God, and all the more because of the horrific storm brought about by Jonah’s failure to actually fear God.

Rosemary Nixon writes of these men on the ship: Whatever the nature of their religious belief, it was characterized by a certain seriousness. They were clear that the storm which threatened their lives was related to a fearful lack of seriousness in Jonah’s religious belief<sup>2</sup>.

Church, the fear of the LORD is a serious thing. When Isaiah has a vision of God’s glory in Isaiah 6:5 he describes the experience this way: And I said, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Isaiah is literally undone...and that is as it should be. Mere mortal men and women should walk in fear of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. God is not our buddy; God is not our genie in the bottle; God is not our therapist or our nagging parent. God is GOD, and He is worthy of our honor, our reverence, our respect, and yes...our fear. The fear of the LORD is our constant recognition of God’s supremacy in every respect to

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Youngblood, Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament: Jonah (Zondervan, 2013); pp 81-82.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Nixon, The Message of Jonah, p. 109.

us. The fear of the LORD is our acknowledgement and our submission to God's authority, recognizing that God is holy and just...and we are not. When you meet people who are truly humble you will recognize the fear of the LORD, for they walk humbly with their God. When you meet people who are truly courageous, you will recognize the fear of the LORD because those who fear the LORD do not fear much of anything else. The fear of the LORD should be a predictable quality amongst those who call themselves believers.

So, let me ask you a question: on a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your "fear of the LORD"? In other words, how would you rate your concern for God's will and God's opinion about your choices and lifestyle? How would you rate your concern regarding God's judgment? How would you rate your "fear of the LORD" as compared to your "fear of what other people think about you"?

Next question, of all those you know who are "outside" of Christianity such as Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, Muslims and Hindus, how would you rank their 'fear of God' as compared to your 'fear of the LORD'? My daughter Kylie has mentioned on multiple occasions that she has a Muslim classmate who has been fasting for the past few weeks in her observation of Ramadan. All over the world Muslims have been abstaining from food until sunset as a public witness to their faith. They are living sacrificially out of their "fear of God." Would it be fair to say that those who worship in other religions have a greater "fear of the LORD" than most of the American Christians you know? I suspect most of us would have to say, 'yes'. Like Jonah, many of us who claim to be Christians in America are willing to stand for our doctrine, but we often fail to walk in our faith as those who truly 'fear the LORD.' Now...we fear a great many things. We "fear" any compromise to our standard of living. We "fear" health issues or financial shortfalls. We "fear" that God might call us to Africa or some foreign people if we ever agreed to be fully devoted to His mission. But most of us could hardly say that we "fear God" to the extent that it leads us to humble prayer and costly obedience. Few of us could say that we "fear God" to the extent that we would have great concern for His judgments and the consequences that might accompany our disobedience. Few of us could say that we truly fear God more than we fear what others might think of us.

Church, please do not ignore this irony in our story. Jonah represents so many of God's people who are aware of the One, True God, but functionally worship an edited version of God that has become comfortable, predictable, and wholly affirming of their current lifestyle. From what we've seen thus far, I think it's safe to say that Jonah's preferred version of God was a god that blessed Israel and hated Israel's enemies. Jonah's preferred version of God was a god that could be blatantly disobeyed without too much concern about painful consequences. Jonah's preferred God was a god that was more concerned about right theology than present obedience. All of which is to say that Jonah did not truly "fear the LORD" in a way that led to prayer and obedience because the actual, edited god that Jonah worshipped was a modified god of his own making...it was a god in his own image.

Ironically, the heathen in this story are more inclined to fear the true God of heaven and earth than Israel's famous prophet who claims to "fear the LORD." This ironic observation

teaches us an important lesson: God is GOD over all the earth, over all people, and some of those people are, ironically, more inclined to fear God and to seek what is right than those religious insiders who should know better.

## **II. Salvation Through Judgement**

The sailors understand that Jonah's God is pursuing his runaway prophet with fury in the storm...a storm that will soon lead to their utter destruction. So, they ask Jonah, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" Jonah is the only person on the boat who is familiar with YHWH. The sailors assume that Jonah will know what punishment they might enact upon the rogue prophet in order to appease the angry God of Israel. Salvation from the storm depends on satisfying God's justice against disobedience. They understand that their salvation must come through God's judgement against Jonah.

Notice that these rough and tumble heathens do not immediately take justice into their own hands and kill Jonah. They are not interested in vengeance; they are not overly occupied with blame and shame; they are simply trying to learn how they might survive the storm that Jonah's disobedience has brought upon them. They are even willing to apply the punishment if there is a particular role that they need to play to appease the angry god. Time is of the essence. We read in vs. 11, "For the sea grew more and more tempestuous." Survival for every man on the ship is the priority. All that truly matters now is salvation from the storm, and they look to Jonah to show them a path forward. It's a defining moment as all eyes look to the dripping prophet awaiting his response.

Then, with apparently little hesitation, Jonah replies, "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."

Jonah articulates what the sailors must do if they are to survive the storm. Just as they previously hurled the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship, so they must now hurl Jonah into the sea if they have any hope of salvation.

Now...Jonah's response begs many questions. For one, why doesn't Jonah simply jump off the boat himself? Why must these men be responsible for ending Jonah's life? Better yet, why doesn't Jonah simply drop to his knees and repent before God, asking God to forgive him for his disobedience? I'll come back to those questions in just a minute, but let us keep our focus on the sailors a bit longer.

The sailors may have anticipated that Jonah would have to be punished, but it's obvious that this command to kill Jonah is not at all what the sailors expected. They look at each other and decide that it would be best to exhaust all other options before taking a man's life. We read in vs. 13, "Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them." The heathens do what all people try to do when it comes to surviving the storm: they dig in and try to muscle their way out of it. However, they soon discover that their collective efforts are futile against the overwhelming fury of God's wrath. Still...the heathen sailors are fearful about taking a human life. So, they pray.

In vs. 14 we read: Therefore they called out to the LORD, "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 it pleased you." When I read this prayer, I could not help but remember Pontius Pilate washing his hands in front

of the angry mob shouting for Christ's crucifixion. Pilate had the same concerns as these heathen sailors...he was concerned about the curse that might come from the gods should he kill an innocent man. Do you remember that scene in Matthew 27? Pilate shouts, "I am innocent of this man's blood, see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children."

Very much like Jesus, Jonah is now the one who must die in order for others to be saved. The sailors, having exhausted all other options, finally yield to the prophet's instruction. We read in vs. 15, "So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging."

God's judgment is satisfied, and the men are saved. Judgement, and then salvation. We'll look later at how the sailors respond, but for now, let us look briefly at my third subheading.

### **III. Substitutionary Love**

As I mentioned a minute ago, this part of the story leaves us with many questions about Jonah's heart and intent. We cannot help but wonder if Jonah's offer to be sent to his doom is a decision made out of deep regret or an attempt at assisted suicide. Is Jonah repenting, or is he basically deciding that he would rather die at sea than go to Nineveh? As I read through many sources on Jonah, I would have to say the answer is probably somewhere in the middle. We should not think that Jonah has had a sudden change of heart, yet now that he is known by the crew, now that he has engaged with them as men in conversation in the midst of a threatening storm, there does seem to be a change of posture.

In his commentary on Jonah, Tim Keller writes: The clue to understanding Jonah's outlook at this point is embedded in his answer to the sailors' question. Notice he says nothing about God. His concern is elsewhere. He says that if they throw him into the water, 'the sea will become quiet *for you*, for I declare it is on my account that this great storm has come *upon you*. Jonah starts to take responsibility for the situation not because he's looking at God but because he's looking at them. And this is significant.<sup>3</sup>

Jonah begins to see the sailors as human beings. Jonah has watched as these men cried out to their gods, as they worked hard to keep the ship afloat, as they cast lots to hear from God, as they addressed him with courtesy and interest. Even now these men have treated him with respect and sought his counsel as to how they might please God. These are not the monsters Jonah imagined the Gentiles to be. These men are not less than human...they are beautifully human. And so, if nothing else, Jonah feels pity for these men.

Keller writes: Jonah may have been moved by nothing higher than pity, but that was far better than contempt. Often the first step in coming to one's senses spiritually is when we finally start thinking of somebody—anybody—other than ourselves. Jonah is essentially saying, "You are dying for me, but I should be dying for you. I'm the one with whom God is angry. Throw me in."<sup>4</sup>

Church, there is tremendous irony here once again, but it's so important to notice. Remember that Jonah's commission by God was to risk his life, to even give up his life, in order to communicate God's judgement to the Gentile outsiders in Nineveh that they might repent and be saved by God's mercy. It was potentially one man's life (Jonah's!) for the salvation of a nation.

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<sup>3</sup>Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God*, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60.

But Jonah wanted nothing to do with that plan. Jonah thought that he understood God's justice to be final and absolute. The Gentiles, and especially the Ninevites, deserved God's justice. They deserved death. They deserved hell. Jonah didn't trust some new notion of justice that would include mercy for Israel's enemies; this is why he has been running from God.

But notice now what has happened. Jonah ran from the Gentile nation of Assyria and found himself on a boat full of Gentiles. And once again, Jonah has been placed in a position to bear witness to God's presence and God's judgments to these religious outsiders. However, instead of the prophet crying out against the evil of the Gentiles, the Gentiles are crying out against the evil of the Israelite! Sadly, Jonah the man of God is not willing to repent. He doesn't think to ask for God's forgiveness. He's still not ready to proclaim mercy to the enemy, or even to himself. Instead, Jonah is resigned to his punishment. He understands his penalty: death by drowning.

Church, like so many of us, Jonah thinks that he understands God's justice. It's black and white for Jonah. Sinners deserve judgement. This whole storm is his fault...he has been disobedient, and so he deserves to die.

If you've ever seen the musical *Les Misérables* (because I know you didn't actually read the book), Jonah is represented in the police officer known as Javert (show pic<sup>5</sup>). If you recall, Javert has a crime and punishment sense of justice that is unyielding. He has no mercy in his heart, and he is certain that God approves of his commitment to justice. However, later in the show, when the former prisoner, Jean Valjean, shows mercy to Javert, Javert is absolutely undone. He has no place in his worldview for mercy, so he jumps off a bridge and commits suicide. That's where Jonah is right now.

However, there is a breakthrough here, whether Jonah can see it or not. For the first time, Jonah finds it reasonable to voluntarily give up his life in order to save the Gentile outsiders on the boat. He essentially says, "I'll take the wrath of the waves so that you don't have to." Even though Jonah deserves to die, he could have taken all the Gentiles down with him. Instead, Jonah volunteers to go down to a watery grave so that the sailors might be spared. It's a beautiful moment...it's a redemptive moment...it's a teachable moment. As corrupt as Jonah's heart might seem, there's still a love there that comes from God. It's the deepest kind of love.

Church, the deepest love in the world is substitutionary love. Keller writes: True love meets the needs of the loved one no matter the cost to oneself. All life-changing love is some kind of substitutionary sacrifice. Whenever we keep a promise or a vow to someone despite the cost, whenever we forgive someone whom we could pay back, whenever we stay close to a suffering person whose troubles are draining to her and all those around her, we are loving according to the pattern of substitutionary sacrifice. Our loss, whether of money, time, or energy, is their gain. We decrease that they may increase. Yet in such love we are not diminished, but we become stronger, wiser, happier, and deeper. That's the pattern of true love, not a so-called love that uses others to meet our needs for self-realization.<sup>6</sup>

Jonah is not a hero here, but he is what we call a "type." Like many other characters in the Old Testament, Jonah is a "type" of Jesus. He points us to Jesus, and nowhere more than at this moment. Jesus voluntarily got onto our sinking boat, ravaged by the storm of our sins, and

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<sup>5</sup> <https://imaging.broadway.com/images/regular-43/w800/119496-11.jpg>

<sup>6</sup> Keller, pp. 61-62.

He said, “I’ll take the wrath of the waves so that you don’t have to.” We love Jesus because of his substitutionary sacrifice on our behalf. If not for His sacrifice, our ship is doomed and our fate is sealed. No amount of rowing will save us from the storm of God’s justice. That’s the power of sin.

But the power of substitutionary sacrifice is greater than the power of sin. We see that perfectly in Jesus, but we see a version of that truth in Jonah. Jonah is a mess. He’s proud, he’s disobedient, he’s got a twisted view of God and a twisted view of justice. Jonah hasn’t done one thing right in this entire story so far. But as Peter states in 1 Peter 4:8, love overcomes a multitude of sins. When Jonah takes responsibility for his mess and offers his life as a substitutionary sacrifice for the religious outsiders, we immediately love Jonah because he’s reflecting the image of God.

God is a God of judgment, but He’s also the God of substitutionary love...He is a God of infinite mercy. You’ll never truly love God, and you’ll never truly worship God if you fail to see His justice or His mercy...we must see both, we must submit to both. It’s there in God’s judgment and God’s infinite mercy that souls are forever changed.

Look now to the response of the sailors in vs. 16: Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

Can you see it? The heathens met the One True God in the storm. They witnessed His judgment and His justice in the storm, but when the waves are suddenly stilled following a substitutionary sacrifice made on their behalf for their salvation, they experience God’s mercy. And it’s now...when the sea is calm, and the storm is no more, that they “exceedingly fear the LORD”! Why? Because they have met the ONE TRUE GOD...the God of perfect justice and perfect mercy. They understand themselves now as those who have been saved. So, they exceedingly fear the LORD. They make sacrifices, they make vows...they are forever changed. We’ll return to the story next week, but for now I will leave you with two takeaways to think about this week.

- 1) If you know yourself to be saved...if you truly believe that you were bound for destruction in a storm of your own making and you were saved when Jesus took the dive on your behalf, then you will exceedingly fear the LORD! You will forever remember the weight of your sin and the horrific costliness of Jesus’ sacrifice on your behalf. You will walk in the fear of the LORD, and that will be reflected in your humility and in your courage. But please, do not tell unbelievers that you “fear the LORD” if you actually don’t. You’re not kidding anybody but yourself.
- 2) Love makes sacrifices. If you are not sacrificing anything for the people you say that you love, then you are not actually loving those people. The Gospel calls us to love all people with a substitutionary, sacrificial love. We can only love people this way because Jesus first loved us this way. And Church, the call to substitutionary love is not optional for Christians; it defines Christians. So take some time this week and ask yourself: who is God calling me to love with a substitutionary, sacrificial love? And then commit to

loving those people as Jesus first loved you. This is the way the world will come to know Jesus...when they see the Jesus people loving like Jesus loved, amen? Let us pray.