

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JONAH

*“The Prodigal Prophet”*

Jonah 1:11-17

**STUDY (3)**

By

**REV (DR) PAUL FERGUSON**



10 Bukit Batok Crescent, #01-01/02, The SPIRE  
Singapore 658079

[www.cornerstonechurch.sg](http://www.cornerstonechurch.sg)

## “FINGER OF GOD”

Jonah’s sin has just been uncovered in a public manner. It is amazing that these unbelieving Gentile sailors can see God’s hands so clearly, “*Why hast thou done this?*” (v10) They also were astounded that Jonah was so foolish as to sin so deliberately and foolishly. The inconsistency of God’s people is often a marvel to the world. Possibly these sailors had heard of Jehovah who had destroyed Pharaoh and his army by the Red Sea judgment. They no longer just tremble at the storm but the reasons behind why God sent it.

Today professing Christians think nothing in sinning against God. They live like “practical atheists.” Richard Phillips points out the tragedy of this,

This shows that when the church is awake, God uses the church to awaken the world. Christians wonder why there is no fear of God in the society around us. The reason is that there is so little fear of God in the church. History reveals that great revivals always begin in the church: Christians regain their vision of the great and holy God they serve; they fear him; they revere him; they grasp with awe the saving message of grace in Jesus Christ.

We see the great wisdom of God here. He weaves His redemptive plan through diverse people and circumstances. The Lord could have struck down this rebellious prophet, but He uses his confession to evangelise these heathens. The testimony of Jonah was heightened to them in the midst of the raging storm. If God could do this to a backslidden prophet, they could only but imagine what He would do to them for their sins.

*Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous. And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. (v11-12)*

These mariners did not know much about God, but Jonah did so they desperately turn to him for answers. Natural theology can only take you so far. It is sad to observe that the first recorded words of Jonah do not give a profitable answer. He makes no effort to seize this incredible moment to evangelise these receptive hearts. Indeed, there is no indication of him praying over how he should respond. Yes he had acknowledged his sin, but he had not truly repented. The Westminster Confession of Faith gives a true definition of repentance,

By it a sinner, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.

Instead of repenting, he simply advised that they effectively terminate his life and ministry, “*Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.*” One of the fruits of backsliding is that you despair of future ministry. We see this in the lives of the choicest of God’s saints – Moses, Elijah, Peter. An unrestored backslider is in a bitter state. As JC Ryle observed,

It is a miserable thing to be a backslider. Of all unhappy things that can befall a man, I suppose “backsliding” is the worst. A stranded ship, a broken-winged eagle, a garden overrun with weeds, a harp without strings, a church in ruins--all these are sad sights. But a backslider is a sadder sight still. That true grace shall never be extinguished, and true

union with Christ never be broken off, I feel no doubt. But I do believe that a man may fall away so far that he shall lose sight of his own grace, and despair of his own salvation. And if this is not hell, it is certainly the next thing to it! A wounded conscience, a mind sick of itself, a memory full of self-reproach, a heart pierced through with the Lord's arrows, a spirit broken with a load of inward accusation—all this is a taste of hell. It is a hell on earth.

Now some writers commend Jonah's instructions as the tragic heroism of a martyr. Some even go as far as to argue that he is a type of Christ laying down his life for sin and for others. However, I am not convinced. Martyrs die for the glory of God, whereas this man just had despaired of life. If he really wanted to die for others, he could have thrown himself overboard. The reality is that he should have cried unto God for mercy and requested that they turn the ship around so that they could all go to Nineveh to preach the gospel. This act of true repentance would likely have brought the storm to an end. It would have been a most glorious way to evangelise the hearts of the sailors.

*Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them. Wherefore they cried unto the LORD, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee. So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging. (v13-15)*

The reaction of these pagan sailors indicates that this request of Jonah to take his life was not the will of God. The reason the storm continues is because Jonah had not fully repented. He is still going the wrong direction. God is now going to teach Jonah a lesson of grace from these Gentiles he despised. They care more about his physical safety than he does about their spiritual safety and the safety of hundreds of thousands of perishing souls in Nineveh. These mariners also teach Jonah a lesson of prayer. He resists praying to Jehovah but they "*cried unto the LORD.*" These things should have convicted the heart of this rebellious prophet.

These men were rough sailors from a pagan background. They owed Jonah nothing and he had brought them nothing but trouble, including losing them the cargo that they had to jettison. Yet they show by this incident that they fear God's Law on murder more than their personal inconvenience. They did everything they humanely could to save the life of this undeserving man, who cared little for them.

In their prayer to Jehovah, these men don't look so pagan anymore. They have come a long way in a few verses. Their prayer is now saturated with God-centred theology. Previously, they cried to their own gods (v5). Now, they cry to Jehovah the covenant God of Israel only. They also have an implicit understanding of the justice of God in their prayer, "*We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood.*" They also acknowledge the absolute sovereignty of Jehovah to judge sin in the sea and to freely exercise His will, "*for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee.*" It is tragic that Jonah still resists praying and acknowledging the same. That is why he must face further chastisement. He was willing to perish in a watery grave rather than repent and preach to the Gentiles.

The Lord who sent the great storm can also sent a great calm, "*and the sea ceased from her raging.*" God does not need to stir their lives anymore as they are at the point of true repentance. Some more work needs to be done on the unrepentant Jonah.

*Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows. (v16)*

The sea will be silenced but not the sailors. Where these men converted at that time? Some believe not, but I believe they were. There are a number of reasons to suggest the fruits of repentance:

(i) They sacrificed to Jehovah with vows after the sea was still. This shows they recognized sin and they way to seek forgiveness. They didn't simply rejoice that the sea was calmed and then go back to their idolatry and sin. No they are vowing to live a different way from before. Clearly they recognized their sinfulness now. They must have seen that if God chastised His servants in such a fashion, how much greater will be the punishment of heathen such as themselves.

(ii) They desired to pray and worship Jehovah alone – no mention is now made of their impotent gods.

(iii) Their theological understanding is already correct about Jehovah in the preceding verses.

(iv) This fits the flow of the narrative – God is proving to Jonah (and us) that He can save Gentiles.

God can save His elect through our disobedience but we get no blessing. However, if God uses us by our obedience, we will share in a great reward. While Jonah is still a prodigal, the pagan sailors have become saints of God. The Lord used Jonah in spite of what he was, as God's work does not depend on man. It also proves that the hypocrisy of a believer is no excuse for a man to reject the gospel. These sailors demonstrate that, as they had one of the worst examples of a believer before them, yet they still believed.

*Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (v17)*

The moment that Jonah entered the waters it seemed a sentence of death. God shows His sovereignty over the natural world again by bringing this fish at the right time to swallow Jonah. In this ongoing judgment, the Lord remembers mercy. He could justly have let Jonah die in the sea, as the prodigal prophet had a wonderful opportunity to repent on the deck of that boat.

Again we have more evidence of the sovereignty of God in this verse. A sovereign God not only ordains the end, but also provides the means to that end. He sent the storm, He arranged for the lot to fall on Jonah, He sent a fish by His divine GPS to the right place at the right time to deal with Jonah, and He sent the immediate calm to the sea. His providential hand is also still seen in keeping His rebellious prophet alive “*in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*”

There is often so much focus by readers on this “*great fish*” that they overlook God's sovereignty here. We also miss a further work of grace. As Thomas Carlisle points out, “I was so obsessed with what was going on inside the whale that I missed seeing the drama inside Jonah.” The Lord is working all of this together for good – to reach the sailors with the gospel, to restore Jonah, and to speak to us today about backsliding.

This story also gives us all great hope in praying for backsliders. Remember, God knows where all the prodigal children are, He knows how to touch their lives, and He knows just the means to bring them back. It may look smooth sailing at the beginning but God can catch up with sinners by a multitude of storms that will rock their boats of disobedience.

God loves His children too much than to let them run forever! He loves us even when we are unlovable! Our God is not an Arminian God whose love for us is capricious. The golden chain of redemption has links which are unbreakable by man as they are all tied up in God's sovereign will, "*whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified*" (Rom. 8:30). Our Father will not be forgotten or written out of our lives. There is going to be no escape for Jonah.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter teaches us of the futility of running from God. If God chastised Jonah, will He not do so to you? What is the Tarshish that you are running away to? If you are on the run from God today, learn this lesson early and well. Embrace the gracious call to repentance for your sin and slumber. Are you willing to do this?

During the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905 an old backslidden shepherd was convicted. He prayed, "Lord, I got among the thorns and briars, and was scratched and torn and bleeding; but, Lord, it is only fair to say that it was not on Thy ground; I had wandered out of Thy pasture." Have you wandered today?

**I've wandered far away from God,  
Now I'm coming home;  
The paths of sin too long I've trod,  
Lord, I'm coming home.**

**I've wasted many precious years,  
Now I'm coming home;  
I now repent with bitter tears,  
Lord, I'm coming home.**

*Coming home, coming home,  
Nevermore to roam,  
Open wide Thine arms of love,  
Lord, I'm coming home.*

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is Jonah's motive in asking to be thrown overboard?
2. What was the result of Jonah's disobedience?
3. Does this story give you hope in praying for a backslider?
4. Can God abandon or divorce His children?
5. What does this story tell you about the sovereignty of God?