

PROPHET OVERBOARD!

When God Controls the Dice, Your Number Will Come Up

*A Journey through Jonah:
Embracing and Extending God's Scandalous Mercy*

Text: Jonah 1:7-16

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 the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ 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?" ⁹ And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." 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.

Introduction:

This morning as we continue our journey through the short but powerful book of Jonah, I want us to think about the impact of a good story. Stories are powerful, compelling ways to communicate important, life-shaping truths because good stories:

- bring truth near – by drawing us in and grabbing our attention.*
- make truth vivid and real – we see the truth in life and action.*
- make truth memorable – what we see or learn makes a lasting impact on our thinking and our living.*
- make truth portable and accessible – we can bring the lessons in the story to various circumstances and different areas of our lives.*
- make truth personal and permanent – the story changes us on multiple levels either for good or for evil.*

"Tale As Old As Time, Song As Old As Rhyme" is a familiar way of introducing a particular story that is very familiar and that teaches a very powerful truth or

important life lesson told through the words, actions, and reactions of the main characters in the story. Let me give you some examples:

- 1. "If the shoe fits, wear it" – Cinderella.*
- 2. "Don't judge a book by its cover" – Beauty and the Beast.*
- 3. "Be careful what you wish for" – Aladdin and the Magic Lamp.*
- 4. "Appearances are deceiving, and things are not always what they seem . . . there is more here than meets the eye" – Snow White.*

*As impactful and memorable as these lessons are when we encounter them in a fable or fairy tale, they are even more so when we see them lived out and experienced in the life or experiences of a real person. **True stories have true power to truly communicate important life lessons.** And the true story of Jonah's life has that kind of power if we truly embrace the lessons God taught Jonah for ourselves.*

All good stories wrap truth in the actions, words, responses, and events that happen to the characters in the story – and Jonah is no exception. The plot of the story advances in scenes or "acts" (like those of a good play), and we are just in time to catch the second act in the story. The scene involves a ship about to break apart in the grip of a great storm, seasoned sailors who are terrified, and a sinning prophet who has gone down below deck and, to paraphrase Martin Luther, "is snoring away in his sins."

This morning, I want us to do three things: 1.) I want us to look intently and consider thoughtfully what is happening in this scene; 2.) I want us to listen carefully and observe closely the words and actions of the main characters in the scene; and 3.) I want us to recognize and embrace five important lessons God is trying to teach each one of us through this scene and apply them to where we are at this moment in the story God is writing for us by His grace, through His mercy, and for His glory. In the first scene, we met Jonah, a faithful prophet who had been serving the Lord for many years in a hard place and dark space – the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of one of its more wicked kings, Jeroboam II. God's chosen people had abandoned God's Word and were flagrantly disobeying God's stated will by embracing idolatry, engaging in immorality, and celebrating injustice among themselves.

Jonah had faithfully preached to and prayed for these sinning people for many years as he witnessed the bitter affliction and desperate state of the nation to whom God sent him. Like his predecessors, Elijah and Elisha, Jonah must surely have called his people to repent. Surely, he fervently prayed for God to show mercy and not wrath upon this sinning nation. And God heard Jonah's prayers and sent him to Jeroboam with a stunning message of undeserved mercy (2 Kings 14:23-27).

However, when God determined to send Jonah to Nineveh with a similar message of mercy, Jonah determined not to go! Instead, he made his way to Joppa, purchased passage on a ship to Tarshish, and fled from the presence of the Lord (1:1-3). The first scene focused our attention on Jonah running away from God on a downward journey that eventually took him to the very bottom of the sea. However, while Jonah may have been fleeing from the presence of the Lord, the Lord was not about to let his faithful prophet go without a fight. God gathered the wind in His mighty hand and hurled it as an unseen javelin upon the ocean in the very path of the ship Jonah where Jonah lay asleep to the will of God, the needs of those around him, and his own desperate state.

With the first scene firmly fixed in our mind, the curtain rises, and the second act begins with pandemonium on deck and a snoring prophet below deck. Make sure to notice key elements in this scene!

I. Fearful Desperation (1:5-6)

*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. 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.**"*

A. The Response of Desperate Sinners – they feared greatly.

- These men were seasoned sailors, well acquainted with the sea and well experienced in the art of navigating its dangers.*
- There is no evidence in the text that they thought the voyage was ill-advised or ill-timed such as the voyage taken in Acts 27 where a ship bound for Rome set sail at a dangerous season for sailing and encountered a similar storm (Acts 27:1-44).*

- *This storm came up out of nowhere – and it was so fierce and ferocious the ship threatened not just to sink but to break apart – and these seasoned sailors were terrified!*
- *This is the first of three references in this story where the narrator wants you to note the fear of the sailors (vv. 5,10,16).*
- *They each began to pray to their gods for help and salvation! The picture is not one of perfunctory praying – but of fervent, desperate, passionate calling out to their gods for help and deliverance from certain death!*
- *The situation was so dire and death so imminent, that as they prayed, they began to hurl the precious cargo (for which they would be held financially liable) over the side!*
- *But as we follow the camera, it pans out just in time to catch someone disappearing down below deck – Jonah!*

B. The Response of a Disobedient Servant – he slept thoughtlessly.

- *The text indicates that when Jonah saw all this fervent praying and desperate action, instead of calling to God and interceding for them or even lending his hand to theirs, he did an unthinkable thing – he left them to their fate, went below deck, and went for one final sleep before he met his fate along with the pagan sailors.*
- *How different than the sailors above who were praying.*
- *How different than Paul, who when facing the exact same situation prayed for and comforted those with him on the ship with these words: Acts 27:22-25—*
22 Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23 For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, 24 and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ 25 So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.
- *Jonah’s sinful disobedience made him deaf to God and blind to the desperate needs of those around him. And our own disobedience will do the same to us.*
- *But God is neither deaf nor blind – and just because He appears to be silent, we must never assume He is absent!*

II. Sovereign Revelation (1:7-9)

- *The suddenness of the storm was so untimely and its fierceness so unusual, the sailors rightly concluded that this was no ordinary storm – but one that had arisen supernaturally.*
- *When their desperate prayers and actions did not avail the help of their gods, and when they could not prevail over the force of the storm – they determined to seek out the cause for the tempest that had come against them with such deadly ferocity.*
- *It must have been a truly desperate situation for them to stop rowing to engage in an act of divination in the midst of the storm while the waves were crashing over the sides of the ship!*
- *These sea-worthy sailors were convinced the storm had come upon them on account of some great sin or offense committed by someone on board the vessel. And so they appealed to providence to identify the culprit.*

A. Providential Revelation (1:7)

*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 the lot fell on Jonah.***

- *In Jonah’s day, the pagan idolatrous nations had many ways of divining truth from their gods.*
- *You could appeal to the priests or “oracle” of the god you served who had mystical means by which they accessed the god.*
- *You could divine things by observing unusual patterns in nature like the color of the sky, unusual animal behavior, or unusual heavenly phenomenon like an eclipse.*
- *You could offer a sacrifice to your god and read the answer from the god in the condition of the entrails or organ of the sacrifice.*
- *If you were particularly desperate, you might select your best maiden or strongest warrior and send them to visit the god to bring gifts and make intercession for you in person.*
- *However, all of these methods were prohibited by God for Israel as means of divining truth.*
- *He gave them two primary ways of divining truth before the time when the complete Scripture was given.*

- **First**, in national matters, the king or military leader could ask the High Priest to inquire of the Lord by using the Ephod and the Urim and Thummim (Ex 28:30; Lev 8:8; Num 27:21; Dt. 33:8; Josh 7:14-18; 1 Sam 14:37-45; 2 Sam 21:1).
- **Second**, the Lord permitted his people to prayerfully cast lots and trust Him for their outcome (Lev 16:8-10; Judges 20:9; 1 Sam 10:19-21; Neh. 11:1; Prov 18:18, 16:33*; Acts 1:26).
- God permitted this means and promised to sovereignly superintend its outcome – “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” (Prov 16:33)
- Providentially, these sailors just happened to select the one means by which God promised to bring to light the truth hidden to His people.
- As soon as Jonah saw the lots come out – he knew his number was up! And sure enough, the lots were cast, and Jonah was exposed as the culprit responsible for the disaster that had overtaken them and was threatening to destroy their lives.
- **NOTE:** Everything thus far in the story is controlled by God – the wind, the storm, and now the lots! Everything that is but His wayward prophet!

B. Probing Investigation (1:8)

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?”

- Jonah was caught – there was no escaping the providential revelation that had come by a means God Himself had promised to superintend – there was no point denying the obvious.
- And since he is the obvious cause of the trouble, the sailors urge him to explain to them why his God has brought this disaster upon them as well as him!
- **Often questions stir our conscience whereas accusations frequently harden our will – and here Jonah faces questions rather than accusations.**
- In this scene, the sailors ask Jonah four questions: 1.) What is your occupation (who are you)? 2.) Where do you come from? 3.) What is your country? 4.) Who are your people?

- *As Jonah faces these probing questions and looks into the faces of the desperate sailors who are about to perish – there is no point in hiding the truth God has chosen to expose, and so for the first time in the book, he opens his mouth and speaks.*

C. Reluctant Identification (1:9)

And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

1. Jonah confesses His Identity – I am a Hebrew.

Everyone in Jonah’s world knew what it meant to be a Hebrew. These were the people whose God defeated Pharaoh and drowned his entire army! These were the people whose God tore down the walls of the mighty fortress city of Jericho and assisted Joshua in defeating the armies of seven mighty nations dwelling in Canaan! These were the people whose God raised up David and then established the richest kingdom ruled by his son, Solomon – the wisest king on earth! This was the God who lived in the most majestic temple ever built at that time!

2. Jonah confesses His God – I fear the Lord.

- *Jonah makes a theological confession here – “I worship and serve the Lord (fear = serve/worship)”.*
- *Everyone in Jonah’s day knew who Yahweh was – He was the most powerful God in the cosmos. None of the gods of the nations could stand before Him or His ark – as Dagon, god of the Philistines could well attest. As the gods of the Hittites and the Canaanites who were powerless to deliver their followers from defeat at the hands of the people who belonged to this God! Ask Baal what happened to the 850 prophets and priest that Jezebel brought into Israel when Elijah stood before them on Mount Carmel in the name of this very God!*
- *Moreover, Jonah didn’t just reveal the name of his God, he pointed out that as Creator, God owned and controlled the sea and the dry land – two places of extreme importance and interest to these sailors at that very moment.*
- *Please note that in this confession Jonah doesn’t tell them everything he knows about God – but he does tell them everything they need to know about God to be delivered!*

3. Jonah confesses His Sinful Disobedience – I am fleeing from His presence (1:10b . . . for he had told them).

- *Jonah’s confession finally paves the way and opens the door for the salvation and deliverance that is going to come first for these sailors, then for himself from the bottom of the ocean, for the Ninevites in chapter three, and finally for us the readers!*
- ***One of the big lessons in this book is that confession is essential for salvation from the Lord!***
- *But first, there is a request first posed by the captain back in 1:6.*
- *“Jonah, we don’t know your God ... but if He is really who you say He is and He made the sea and dry land ... then please pray to Him on our behalf since we need less sea and more dry land!” **And on this point – Jonah remained silent!***

III. Spiritual Manifestation (1:10-13)

A. Horrified Indignation (1:10-11)

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.

1. Note their great fear.

- *This is the second time we read that the sailors were afraid.*
- *In 1:5 they were afraid on account of the fierce storm.*
- *Now here in 1:10, they are greatly afraid on account of the fierce wrath upon them on account of Jonah.*

2. Note their penetrating questions.

- ***“What have you done?”*** – *they already knew what Jonah had done because he had told them he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. They are expressing horrified, moral outrage at what he had done and how he had recklessly endangered not just his own life but theirs!*

- ***“What shall we do with you?”*** – given your position with your God as His prophet, surely you know what to do and what we must do to appease His wrath and avail ourselves of His deliverance!
- ***What an opportunity God has given Jonah to repent.*** He has given a good confession that has led these pagan sailors to very good conclusions – now God has given Jonah a wonderful opportunity to make a good repentance that will lead to mercy, deliverance, and life!
- ***But Jonah refuses and resists yet again!***

B. Self-Righteous Justification (1:12)

*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.”*

- *Note that Jonah knows and admits that he is the reason the great storm has come upon them all (1:12c).*
- *Given what he knows God knows, there are only two options open to Jonah: 1) He can repent, return to the Lord, and obey; or, 2) He can persist in his willful resistance, remove himself from the ship, and resign himself to meeting his fate at the hands of an angry, violent sea.*
- *Because Jonah is stubborn and proud, option 1 is not acceptable to him.*
- *Because in his self-righteous conviction, he has convinced himself that his way is more righteous than God’s, he determines to stay the course no matter what the price even if it means choosing something as drastic as option 2.*
- *Jonah has justified his position and is resisting God even to the point of his own death – because he believes that his mission to protect God’s people and God’s name was so important it justified disobedience on his part that was clear to God, is now clear to others, and even to himself!*
- ***Jonah justified his self-righteous disobedience and now he determines to justify his self-righteous death!***
- *And so he looks at the sailors and says, “Do with me what God did with the wind when He hurled it upon the sea! Do with me what you did with the cargo you hurled into the sea! Pick me up and hurl me into the sea and it will become quiet for you!” (1:12)*
- *Note: At times we do the same – we willfully disregard something God has clearly stated in His Word because we believe we have a better way to protect*

or preserve something He has given us or raised up for us. We believe we are justified in acting in ways that are contrary to His word or character because we are protecting our church, or our ministry, our family, or even our theological position. And we pull a Jonah where we would rather go down with the ship or die on the hill we have staked out – even if others go down or die with us!

- We are willing to split a church, drive away a child, or ruin a ministry because we are convinced that our disobedient course of action is the only way since God obviously does not seem to be working to bring about with our determined position.*

C. Sincere Determination (1:13)

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.

- Once again the pagan sailors show the kind of spiritual concern and compassion that Jonah should have shown toward them and toward the Ninevites.*
- Clearly this man had sinned greatly and offended His God to the point that he merited the horrible death that was upon him.*
- But out of compassion for him and concern for further offending God, they labored with all their might to deliver themselves from the storm and to save Jonah from the death he deserved.*
- Earlier Jonah was unwilling to lift a finger to help them when they tried to lighten the ship even though he knew full well he was the cause of their trouble. Now, these men use all their strength to try to save this man who they now know is the full cause of all they have lost and all they could yet lose!*
- What a contrast in the compassion of these pagan sailors show to the one who cause them such trouble and Jonah's lack of concern for them and his lack of compassion on the Ninevites to whom God wished to send mercy.*

IV. Powerful Transformation (1:14-16)

- By the time we get to the end of the scene, a powerful transformation has happened – in the pagan sailors – and it has happened through Jonah's*

confession and in spite of Jonah's stubborn resistance and willful disobedience!

- *When we met the sailors, each of them were praying desperately and frantically to idols who could not hear them or save them.*
- *However, by the end of the scene, they are praying to the true God of Heaven concerned for what concerns Him and they have cast themselves fully on His sovereign will and merciful compassion!*

A. Humble Intercession (1:14-15)

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.

- *They knew this was no ordinary storm, this was no ordinary prophet, and this was no ordinary God!*
- *They turned from their idols to the true God and called upon Him.*
- *They asked Him for forgiveness for what they must do as they obeyed the word they have received through His prophet. In contrast, Jonah refuses to ask forgiveness for what he does not do in response to the word he has received from God.*
- ***These sailors are concerned about the two very things that Jonah should have been concerned about but wasn't: 1) they were concerned about displeasing God; and 2) they were concerned about the life of a person who belonged to God. Jonah was not concerned about disobeying God nor was he concerned about the lives of an entire city that belonged to God!***
- *They trusted God's sovereign authority – you have done what pleases you!*
- *They obeyed and waited expectantly for God's deliverance – and immediately the sea became ceased from its raging!*

B. Thankful Dedication (1:16)

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

- *This is the third and final reference to the sailors "fearing" – they feared the storm, they feared Jonah's unthinkable disobedience, and **now they fear Jonah's God!***

- *The storm is over, the sea is calm – and the sailors respond in reverential awe in who God is and what He has done for them!*
- *They do three amazing things:*
 1. *They turn to God in reverential awe – they fear YHWH.*
 2. *They are profoundly thankful to God – they offer sacrifices.*
 3. *They dedicate themselves to following God – they vow vows.*

Conclusion: Lessons for Life

It is stunning when Pagans pray better than Prophets.

- *What kind of Christian refuses to pray for others who are in desperate need of deliverance? What kind of Christian refuses to repent in the face of God's clear intervention and severe judgment?*
- *What kind of a believer refuses to lift a finger to help perishing people around him in the midst of a deadly storm?*
 1. *A stubborn, self-willed, self-righteous Jonah convinced himself that he was more righteous than God and that his disobedience was justified because it protected his nation, his people, and his theological conviction.*
 2. *Sometimes us!*

It is stunning when idolaters repent better than children of the One true God.

- *How is it that pagan idolaters respond better to the Word of God than His own appointed Prophet?*
- *How is it that idolatrous sailors repent sooner and better than God's own servant?*
- *How is it that repentant pagans receive the very blessings God wants to give to stubborn prophets?*
- *We see this in the story of Jonah – and sadly, all too often we see it in our own story!*

So, what lessons must we learn from this story?

1. Disobedience is Deadly Serious Business!

- *To God*
- *For Others*
- *For Yourself*
- *So we must not minimize it, justify it, or ignore it*

2. When We Sin Willfully, God Pursues Graciously!

- *In God's time*
- *By God's means*
- *Because of God's love*
- *So, come to God before God has to come for you,*
- *And, respond to God when He comes to you.*

3. Confession is Powerful!

- *Confess your Faith.*
- *Confess your Faults.*

4. Forgiveness is Available to Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime!

- *Forgiveness is available for pagan idolaters who were not innocent bystanders.*
- *Forgiveness is available for a self-righteous sinning prophet.*
- *Forgiveness is available for you and for me!*

5. Genuine Salvation brings Personal Transformation!

Here is what it should look like in our lives:

- *Conversion – Turning to God from our idols.*
- *Gratitude – Thanking and Worshipping God truly.*
- *Dedication – Following and Serving God wholeheartedly.*

***If God was ready to forgive and deliver the sailors, and if He was ready to do the same for Jonah – then He is willing to do the same for you this morning!
So ... confess, believe,***