

A drunk husband came home late and snuck up the stairs quietly. He looked in the bathroom mirror and bandaged the bumps and bruises he'd received in a fight earlier that night. He then proceeded to climb into bed, smiling at the thought that he'd pulled one over on his wife. When morning came, he opened his eyes and there stood his wife. "You were drunk again last night, weren't you?" "No, dear, of course not." "Well, if you weren't, then who put all the band-aids on the bathroom mirror?"

Like this story, sometimes the evidence of the bad choices that we make in life are very apparent – other times they are not. This morning, we are continuing in our study of Jonah – a man who made a very bad choice – he ran from God. Last week we saw where God directed Jonah to go northeast some 500 miles to Nineveh – to personally deliver a message from God to the people of the capital of the Assyrian empire, but instead Jonah handed in his resignation as a prophet, boarded a ship, and headed 2000 miles in the complete opposite direction.

If you remember, Jonah was running from God because he hated the wicked Assyrians – they were enemies of Israel. He wanted to see the wrath of God fall upon them – not God's grace and mercy extended to them if they repented. It was unthinkable to Jonah that these ungodly people could possibly turn from their wicked ways and be forgiven by a compassionate God. This prophet of God, this man of God, couldn't bear to be an instrument used by God to reach a people who did not know God. He just couldn't bring himself to deliver a message to these people – he wanted out of the assignment – so he ran from God, and he boarded a ship to Tarshish Spain.

Turn with me to **Jonah 1**, and we will pick up where we left off, beginning with **verse 4**. Let's see how it worked out for Jonah.

⁴The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. ⁵Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.

In our passage, we don't read that "*the word of the Lord came to Jonah again*" likely because Jonah wasn't listening – he had already heard enough from God. So, it would appear that God is going to speak to Jonah in an entirely different manner – through a raging storm.

We are told that God hurled a great storm at the ship, like hurling a fast ball. It was a storm that came up so fast and so furious that they didn't know what hit

them. It was so bad that it terrified the veteran sailors. I say “veteran” because the literal meaning for sailor in this passage is “salt, old salt” These veteran sailors, who had likely been sailing the high seas all their lives, generally experts at understanding weather patterns, were caught entirely off guard because this storm was unnatural, it came out of nowhere – it was a God thing. And unfortunately, this storm was in the process of ripping their ship apart.

- I do want to clarify something before we move on. In the past, we have talked about the storms of life. We all go through storms to some degree – all of us without exception, but the presence of storms doesn’t always mean we are out of the will of God like Jonah was. Quite simply, life happens to us all – to include the presence of storms. We know that the Lord can calm the storms – we saw Jesus do that in the gospels. We also know that the Lord may choose to let the storm rage and calm His people instead, and as we now see with Jonah – not only can the Lord calm the storm, but at a moment’s notice, He can quickly stir one up to get our attention and turn us around if necessary.

So, the storm is raging, and **what do these pagan sailors do?** They do what we would do – they got really religious all of a sudden, and frantically did whatever they could do to save the ship. The sailors began praying to all their gods for help, whoever they may be, and at the same time their cargo – cargo that was necessary for their livelihood, was being tossed overboard to lighten the ship. It was that bad.

- **Have you ever noticed that when you find yourself in dire straits, things just don’t matter as much anymore?** Sometimes a storm in life will help us to identify the baggage that is weighing us down, baggage which needs to be thrown out of our lives – baggage that needs to be tossed overboard.

Anyway, much of the cargo on the ship was likely below in the cargo hold. And, while the sailors frantically worked and prayed to save the ship, Jonah was found sleeping below deck.

Jonah is not Jesus, so I don’t have any earthly idea how he could sleep during this raging storm. Maybe he was physically and emotionally exhausted by running from God. Maybe his heart was so hardened and insensitive that he was oblivious to what God was doing around him, or maybe the devil knows how to put us to sleep and keep us uninterested while everything around us is being ripped apart. Whatever the case may be, Jonah had some explaining to do – look at **verse 6**.

‘So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.”

The ship’s captain was probably irritated to find Jonah sleeping, while the rest of the crew were desperately tossing cargo and praying to their gods. Now, Jonah was not asked to help with the cargo, but he was told by the captain to pray to his God.

Isn’t it ironic that a pagan sea captain is commanding a prophet of the one true God to pray?

I was reminded of an encounter I had with a man at a nursing home some years ago. A man was admitted to the facility under hospice care. He was dying, and as a volunteer chaplain, I was asked to visit with this man – and I did, but the visit was very short. Once I identified myself as a chaplain, he made it very clear that he was an atheist and he didn’t want to hear my “mumbo jumbo.” He told me to leave and I did.

A few weeks later, nursing home staff asked if I had visited with this dying man and I explained that I had attempted to do so but he essentially kicked me out of his room. I was asked to make another attempt as he was not doing well – so I did.

Again, he made it clear to me that he was an atheist and he didn’t want to be preached to, but he allowed me to stay this time and we talked about a number of other things. At the conclusion of our time together, I told him I was going to be praying for him – whether he approved or not.

Several weeks go by and I visited with him every time I was in the facility and I reminded him each time that I was praying for him. Eventually, his health improved, so much so that he was taken off of hospice and allowed to go back home. Just before he was discharged, I asked this atheist if he wanted me to stop praying for him and he made it clear that he wanted me to continue to pray. That’s coming from a man who says there is no God.

I don’t know what happened to that man, but there is a point to be made. As I said earlier, people go through storms in life, and they may be far from God. They may not come to a church service, they don’t want to hear a sermon, they don’t want a lecture – but they may welcome your prayers for them. What an opportunity that is for you. I want to challenge you, the next time you hear of someone – anyone

having a difficult time, Christian or not, why not ask them: *“Can I pray for you?”* Why not say, *“You know, I pray every morning or every evening, and I have a list of people I pray for. Can I add you to my list?”* Who knows where that may lead, but it’s a start isn’t it?

Okay, sorry for the rabbit trail, so back to our passage. Jonah was asked to pray, but did you notice, we are never told that he did. There is one prayer mentioned in **Jonah 1**. And it’s not Jonah who does the praying. It’s the pagan sailors.

⁷ Each man said to his mate, “Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us.” So, they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, “Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” ⁹ He said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”

Somehow, the pagan sailors recognized this unnatural storm as some sort of divine punishment. They concluded that someone on the ship must have angered his god in some way.

They first prayed to their gods for help, but when this did not happen, they asked Jonah to pray to his God. He does not pray, so as a common ancient practice, they cast lots to find out who might have angered their god – which seems to be like a random game of chance. Casting lots sometimes involved using different colored balls or rocks, mixing them together, and then seeing which one fell out of the bag first. We might say it’s like rolling the dice, but in this particular instance, God is behind those colored stones and He determined which one fell out of the bag first. And sure enough, Jonah was singled out as the culprit. God pointed Jonah out with a roll of the dice and the sailors began to question Jonah.

“Then they said to him, ‘Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?’”

Essentially, they ask, *“Who are you and what are you doing here?”* If you think about it, these are some of the same questions that the Lord might ask us when we are not walking as a child of God or we are some place we do not belong.

Jonah is swamped with these questions, and he replies in verse 9, **“I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”**

I find his statement odd because what Jonah said is the exact opposite of what his actions reveal. **“I fear the LORD God”** and yet his life – his walk contradicted his knowledge of God. But it gets better and even somewhat comical. Look at **verse 10 and 11.**

¹⁰ Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, “How could you do this?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. **¹¹ So they said to him, “What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?”**—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.

Well, Jonah flabbergasted these sailors. **I mean what kind of a man are you who would flee from the God who made the sea?** Now, if you're talking about the God of the mountains only, then maybe you got a chance on the sea, **but how dumb can you be to run from the God who made the sea, especially when you are on the sea?**

It made no sense, and the pagan sailors respond, **“How could you do this?”** or we might say, **“Are you crazy?”** Here is a prophet who is so disobedient that even the pagans are shocked, and in the meantime, the sea continued to become more and more dangerous, and the sailors could only ask Jonah what to do to appease the wrath of his God – the God who made the sea.

¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.” **¹³ However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.** **¹⁴ Then they called on the Lord and said, “We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O Lord, have done as You have pleased.”** **¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.**

And what was Jonah’s answer? Instead of getting on his knees and seeking God’s forgiveness, Jonah told them to throw him overboard into the sea and they will be saved. It seems that Jonah is still unrepentant and would rather die than obey God and share a message to a people he hated. But, instead of tossing Jonah overboard to his death, the sailors desperately tried to reach the shore.

Here we see another irony. The pagan sailors are more gracious and caring than this man of God. They did not want to throw him overboard and tried desperately to get to land without doing that. This is in sharp contrast with the man of God who had no compassion or burden for a people who did not know God. Jonah's love was confined to himself and his own people, but God's love extends much further than that – it extends to the whole world, even to the wicked Ninevites.

When the sailors realized their efforts to reach the safety of the shore was completely useless, they prayed that God would not hold them accountable for Jonah's certain death, and reluctantly they tossed him over the side as he instructed. As soon as they did, the storm ceased. The sailors were saved from the storm and look what they did next – **verse 16**.

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

While Jonah was a fishing lure in water, a revival breaks out on the ship. The sailors recognized that the true God is Jonah's God, so they prayed to the Lord – they offered a sacrifice and they made vows to Him. They were probably vowing that they would follow and obey Him and now there is a boat load of brand-new missionaries headed to Tarshish to tell their own story about Jonah's God.

The pagans have become saints, while the prophet of God is acting like an unbelieving pagan who at the moment is dog paddling in the middle of the sea.

We are told at the end of this chapter, God's grace – a grace disguised as a great fish, shows up and swallows Jonah. **Verse 17** says,

“And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.”

As you might imagine this is the point where critics start to go crazy and offer suggestions. Here are some of their genius ideas:

- Some writers suggest that Jonah really landed on top of a floating corpse of a dead whale and hung on for three days.
- One writer said that another ship named “The Fish” picked up Jonah after he was thrown in the water.
- And yet another writer said that the “Great Fish” was the name of a dingy tied onto the back of the ship; and they just put him in the dingy.

The problem with all of these is we are later told that the great fish vomited Jonah out on shore. From my point of view, the Lord God Almighty, the One who spoke the universe into existence, can do whatever He wants. Quite frankly, He could have created and appointed one special fish for this one special occasion.

As I was thinking about our passage for this morning, an old hymn came to mind called “*Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*” and the last portion of it reads:

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it;
Prone to leave the God I love:
Take my heart, oh, take and seal it
With Thy Spirit from above.
Rescued thus from sin and danger,
Purchased by the Savior’s blood,
May I walk on earth a stranger,
As a son and heir of God.*

God may say, “Go this way” and we may go that way, but God will not let us get away.

*In her book *Chicken Soup for the Woman’s Soul*, Lois Krueger tells the story of Justin Carl, her four-and one-half year-old son. Lois and her husband were experiencing one of those hectic, go in a hundred directions days. Every direction they went they seemed to find Justin Carl in the middle getting into mischief. Over and over they told him, “Don’t do that!” Finally, husband George sent Justin Carl to the corner for a time out. Not at all happy, he piped up, “I’m going to run away from home.”*

Lois stopped to remember a moment from her own childhood when she had spoken those same words. The distant feelings of being unloved and lonely overcame her. She knew her son was crying – “Please notice me. I’m important, too.”

Okay, Justin Carl, you can run away from home,” she whispered tenderly as she started picking out clothes.

*“Mama,” he said, “**what are you doing’?**”*

*“We’ll also need my coat and nightgown,” Lois continued, packing the items in a bag and placing it by the front door. “Okay, Justin Carl, **are you sure you want to run away from home?**”*

*“**Yeah, but where are you going’?**”*

“Well, if you’re going to run away from home, then Mama’s going with you because I would never want you to be alone. I love you too much, Justin Carl.”

Just as Lois watched her son decide to run away from home – God watched His wayward prophet flee from Him, but God loved Jonah even more than Lois loved Justin Carl.

God may say, “Go this way” and you may go that way, but God will not let you get away. Why? Because He loves you that much.

Source Material:

Holman Old Testament Commentary – Max Anders
Exposition Commentary – Warren Wiersbe
The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Walvoord & Zuck
Enduring Word – David Guzik