

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JONAH

“The Prodigal Prophet”

Jonah 1:4-10

STUDY (2)

By

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“ON THE RUN FROM GOD”

In v3 we get an insight into Jonah’s thinking as he gets on the ship, “*to flee unto Tarsish from the presence of the LORD.*” Jonah is on the run from the Lord and everything seems to be working out perfectly. He found a ship going to where he wants to go and he has enough money to pay the price. Jonah seemed to have gotten away with a blatant act of disobedience. But he is about to find that God cannot be hidden from. Spurgeon once observed that God never allows His children to sin successfully. Jonah will exemplify this principle.

The prodigal prophet will learn this truth the hard way. Ironically, he pays in advance and never reached his destination and received no refund. Sin is always costly. There is no free ride on the “Ship of Disobedience!” The devil never gives refunds! Forbidden fruit always looks sweet, but it will turn sour in your stomach! We should not take encouragement in the fact how easily we progress down the path of disobedience. The right way can only be known from what God’s word says.

The wicked often seem to do well for a time. Believers observing can be confused as the Psalmist in Psalm 73. But God as sovereign can step into our circumstances a good while down the road of sin. Immediate reprisals are not always His way. He can afford to wait to those who defy Him. God in His mercy gives this man space to repent as, “*It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not*” (Lam. 3:22).

The Lord’s timetable may not be ours. God knows how to reach us at the right moment. But that is why He is God and we are not. He does not need to be rushed. God catches up with all sinners. Some He deals with more swiftly than others, but He will eventually deal with every one.

But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken. (v4)

When a believer defiantly disobeys a clear command of God, he should not presume that there will be no reaction. There is no escaping the power of God in a thousand worlds! He will pursue you with disappointments, disasters, and dissatisfaction. The Lord has a chosen instrument for every disobedient child. He can call upon them at any time. God knows exactly how to get our attention. He warns through the prophet Amos,

Though they dig into hell, thence shall Mine hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, thence will I bring them down: And though they hide themselves in the top of Carmel, I will search and take them out thence; and though they be hid from My sight in the bottom of the sea, thence will I command the serpent, and he shall bite them: And though they go into captivity before their enemies, thence will I command the sword, and it shall slay them: and I will set Mine eyes upon them for evil, and not for good. (Amos 9:2-4)

All is not as well for Jonah as it first appeared in the circumstances. How quickly things can change. The Lord uses a most unusual instrument here to bring back Jonah. But it will be as equally effective. Matthew Henry notes,

God has many ways of bringing to light concealed sins and sinners, and making manifest that folly which was thought to be hidden from the eyes of all living. God’s right hand will find out all His servants that desert Him, as well as all His enemies that have designs

against Him; yea, though they flee to the uttermost parts of the sea, or go down to the sides of the ship.

God demonstrates His sovereign power over the natural elements here and we read, “*But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea.*” This “*But*” here emphasizes that this is no coincidental climatic condition, but a purposeful act by the Sovereign God. He is Lord over the sea and wind as well as Lord over Israel.

As we consider how God pursues His errant child, we will see an insight as to His dealing with us. Do we not serve the Lord when it suits us? Do we not like to think that we are in control of our lives? The Lord has His ways and His purposes. He can even simply use the wind to stop us in our tracks. God will put His finger on Jonah’s sins through this incident. Many believers foolishly think that they can run away from their calling and the commands of God by a change of location. Perhaps they think that absenting themselves from the people of God will help. However, God can chastise you in the world just as well as in the church. He has complete control over the whole universe.

Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. (v5a)

This storm will be a severe mercy from the Lord. God is not trying to destroy Jonah, but simply get his attention. The purpose of God here is to redirect Jonah’s erring path so his calling and life is not wasted in disobedience. Although, Jonah was determined to forsake God, God determined that he would not allow him to forsake His Lord, “*Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity*” (2 Tim. 2:19). Jonah did reveal his ethnic identity to anyone, let alone his calling. He had no interest in preaching to Gentiles. Yet, God has His way of making us do what He calls us to do, even against our natural desires.

When we sin we do not sin alone. All those on board are endangered by Jonah’s sin. All too often when we sin, we hurt those around us. Instead of being a blessing to the Gentiles, this Hebrew was a curse. These sailors were probably Phoenicians sailors who were especially renowned for their ability to sail. As experienced sailors they would not scare easily in a storm. So this must have been no ordinary storm. They sense the need to cry unto a higher being for help in such a storm. A storm at sea reduces a man to his real size. It is amazing when the crises of life hit that we all become more spiritually inclined. So many are like the band on the Titanic who had played the music of the world all night but only as the great liner was sinking did they strike up the tune, “*nearer my God to Thee.*” These mariners all now believed in the power of prayer. Atheism becomes less persuasive on the brink of eternity.

These men also recognise another truism when they “*cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them.*” They understood that their lives were more precious than material possessions, “*for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth*” (Luke 12:15). They knew that commercial profit was never worth their lives. This is a truth we all need to grasp now before it is too late, “*For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*” (Matt. 16:26)

But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep. (v5b)

This is a tragic spectacle. The sailors try man’s wisdom in throwing out the cargo to solve the crisis, but that can never deal with a spiritual problem. They then try an interfaith prayer meeting

with each man crying out to his own god. But that also is impotent as their gods are nothing. There is no virtue in such prayers. The only man who knows the true God and knows how to pray is sleeping. He is immune to the reality of his danger and of those around him with a false peace of disobedience as “*fast asleep.*” As the pagans were entreating, the prophet was sleeping! Disobeying the word of God inevitably leads to leaving the place of prayer.

Sin always inhibits our ability to discern spiritual realities as well as pray and witness for the Lord. You would expect God’s servant to be the most sensitive to see the workings of God around him. But he is unconscious to the disapproval of an angry God on his life. He is like Samson in Judges 16 who we read, “*And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him*” (Judges 16:20). Why did David, Solomon, and Samson not recognise their danger when they fell? Because backsliding makes you blind and foolish! This explains the blindness that we witness in backslidden Christians today. Often we come to the conclusion that such are not saved but that may not be the case.

The contrast of this backslidden prophet with the faithful apostle in Acts 27 is marked. There, Paul is interceding with God for the lives of himself and his fellow travellers. The man in touch with God is fully aware of the dangers to the spiritual lives of those around him. One writer pointedly observes the application for us,

Let us not miss the lesson of this contrast. A Christian walking in communion with God is on a high level, but a Christian out of communion is a degraded spectacle. Men respect the one, but they despise the other. The one will be a blessing to men; but the other may be a stumbling block, and even a curse!

The materialistic comfort in which we live today has veiled many of our minds to spiritual realities. The devil works hard to get us to fall asleep concerning the need of those around us. He knows that a sleeping believer is an ineffective believer. Why is it that we are so careless about the souls of men and women? C. H. Spurgeon observed,

Jonah was asleep amid all that confusion and noise; and, O Christian man, for you to be indifferent to all that is going on in such a world as this, for you to be negligent of God’s work in such a time as this is just as strange. The devil alone is making noise enough to wake all the Jonahs if they only want to awake . . . All around us there is tumult and storm, yet some professing Christians are able, like Jonah, to go to sleep in the sides of the ship.

So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not. (v6)

God has not finished intervening in the life of the rebellious prophet. Further ironic moments stands out here. The irritated pagan shipmaster has to command the Hebrew prophet to pray. This man knew that God could answer prayer. Jonah did not want to preach to the Gentiles and now a Gentile is preaching to him! It is sad when the Lord has to use a pagan to rebuke a believer. This shipmaster’s implication is that their cries to their gods do not work either. He is not fully persuaded that they have found the true God.

Sadly, there is no mention that Jonah does pray nor even respond to this command. His silence may have been his reply. Backsliders are not people of prayer. For what could a rebellious prophet pray? He already had heard from God but he did not want to obey Him. Jonah would

have known that he would have to confess his sin and obey God for his prayers to be answered, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear me” (Psa. 66:18).

And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? (v7-8)

These mariners could discern that this was a spiritual matter. The amazing thing is that Jonah still does not appear to. The pagan world knows the moral law of God, which is written on their hearts (Rom. 1:32; 2:15-16). But natural revelation only demonstrates that God exists and He will judge man’s sin. It is not enough to save a dying man. For it does not show a man how to cry unto God for mercy and forgiveness, “And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent” (John 17:3). That is why we need the special revelation of the Scriptures, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). The Bible reveals this God to every man. Jonah is the only man on the boat who knows the special revelation. But, “how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14) Now, God will get His reluctant prophet to reveal who He truly is and how He can be found.

These sailors cast lots, which implies that they did not feel their own sins merited the judgment of sin. This imperfect and shallow understanding of our sinfulness is typical of sinners, who never see themselves the way a Holy God sees them. They were confident to face the lot. However, Jonah’s heart must have beaten faster as these lots were cast. But like Achan, he will not confess until he is personally confronted with his sin. However, he is discovered, as he knows that this lot has not fallen by chance but by providence, “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD” (Prov. 16:33). This finger of God on his sin should have pricked his conscience! It is a good thing to be brought to this place of conviction even if it is humiliating and painful.

The asking of multiple questions indicates the panic of these men. Probably they were standing around him firing off these in desperation. This is no time for formal prolonged introductions. These men clearly had not discerned that Jonah was a prophet, “What is thine occupation?” Clearly, Jonah was not interested in witnessing to his Gentile travelling companions. He was indifferent to them perishing in a lost eternity. But when a believer lives like this, expect God to wake you up! For God is the God who, “Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2: 4).

And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land. Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him. Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. (v9-10)

Jonah should have been preaching to the Gentiles at this point in Nineveh instead of sitting under an unsaved Gentile preacher! The rebellious prophet did not want to preach to the Gentiles. Now one preaches to him (v6) and he is then forced in turn to preach to them (v9). The Lord has an amazing way of making us do what He wants us to do. We must marvel at the wisdom of God here. He not only is turning Jonah’s life around in this chastisement, but He also is using his confession to work conviction on the hearts of these pagan sailors.

Up to this point, Jonah has said very little. Even now he evades answering the question as to his occupation; probably, as he knows that it would be hypocritical. His creed, “I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land” is in clear contradistinction to his conduct. For how could he truly fear the God of the “sea” and then try to get away from God’s presence by the sea! It is tragic that his life contradicted his confession of God. Backsliding leads us to contradict our own beliefs! How many of us act the same way constantly? We claim to believe that the Bible is true and that God sees us everywhere, yet we act differently when we are in different places.

Jonah’s confession filled them with fear, as we are told, “Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him. Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.” Probably, they knew something of Jehovah’s power such as the Red Sea incident in His dealings with Pharaoh. They also now recognise that the Jehovah is not just the God of Israel but also of the sea. The light is beginning to dawn on their darkened souls. They also were amazed at the brazen rebelliousness of the prophet of God, “Why hast thou done this?” Some actions of believers even shock the unsaved (cf. Gen. 20:9; 1 Cor. 5:1). How humiliating for us when the unsaved world asks such a logical question of us. The amazing thing is that they did not throw him into the sea the moment the lot fell on him or the moment he confessed his fault.

Why did God pick such a man with such a rebellious attitude to go to Nineveh? The answer has to be to show that He is sovereign so that He gets all the glory. This proves once again that it is foolish to try and work out God’s strategies and great plans for mankind. It also demonstrates to us today the price of disobedience. Ray Pritchard questions:

Whenever the word of the Lord comes to us, it demands a response. What will you do with what God has said? Will you run the other way? If you decide to run, you’ll probably find a ship going your way.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is partial obedience acceptable to the Lord?
2. Has God been speaking to you about something He wants you to do?
3. Describe unusual ways that God speaks to His people in the Scriptures.
4. Why do people get more interest in spiritual things in a crisis?
5. Why do we take so long to confess our sins?