

See Jonah Sleep

The Prodigal Prophet – Part III

Jonah 1:4-16

Introduction

When a man decided to go to a Cincinnati Reds ball game with his girlfriend, he knew he was running from the law. He had already broken parole – no one knew where he was. In addition, he had failed to appear in court for a drug charge.

During the game, the Kiss Cam went to work, spotted David and his girlfriend as they kissed, and their picture went up on the big screen for 30,000 people to see. Before the end of the game he was arrested.

His lawyer later complained, “Out of 30,000 people in the ballpark that day, my client is the one who not only gets his picture put on the big screen, but his parole officer just so happens to be at the same ball game.”ⁱ

This man was caught.

There was a prophet who failed to appear in the capital courtroom of Nineveh’s king. He was evidently under the impression, as he ran in the opposite direction, that he could hide from the surveillance lens of an omniscient, omnipresent God.

If you are just now joining us in our study through the journal of Jonah, thus far we can easily summarize all that has happened with one simple sentence, “God said, ‘Go,’ and Jonah said, ‘No.’”

We could also summarize our study with a slightly longer sentence, “God said, ‘Jonah, I want you to go and deliver a message of mercy,’ and Jonah said, ‘I’d rather resign than see Ninevites repent.’”

So Jonah, the prophet of God, resigned his commission. He turned in his prophet’s badge and

hospital pass card, took the fish sticker off his carriage bumper, gave all his manuscripts to some younger prophets who could use them, and headed for the coast of Spain – the exact opposite direction from Nineveh.

However, he will discover that God has not accepted his resignation. In fact, God is going to give Jonah some time to do some deep thinking.

The next thing that happens in chapter 1 can be divided into three dramatic scenes – each with their own subtitle:

- Scene One: Don’t Disturb!
- Scene Two: Don’t Ask!
- Scene Three: Don’t Turn Around!

Scene One: Don’t Disturb!

Scene One opens in Jonah 1:4.

The 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.

What descriptive language. The Hebrew text for this could be rendered, “The Lord picked up a great wind and hurled it to the sea.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Continue to the first part of verse 5.

Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god . . .

The Hebrew text for this verse could be translated, “each of the sailors shouted to his own god in prayer.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

There is a spontaneous prayer meeting going on deck by extremely terrified sailors.

The word translated “sailor,” in verse 5, comes from the Hebrew noun used for “salt”. To this day, an old fisherman or sailor is called an “old salt”.^{iv}

These men are veteran sailors. They have ridden the high seas; they know storms. However, this storm is so incredible swift and sudden that they assume it will take God to get them out of it alive. And they are right.

The last part of verse 5 informs us that,

. . . Jonah had gone down below into the hold of the ship, lain down and had fallen sound asleep.

It is ironic that pagans are praying and the prophet of God is sleeping.

While they are praying and Jonah is sleeping, the sailors are tossing out everything that is not nailed down.

Jonah is not just sleeping. The end of verse 5 tells us he was sound asleep.

I thought it was funny that the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates this verb “to snore”. Jonah is snoring away and that is probably how the captain found him.^v

How many you, men, sleep like the prophet of God? Never mind, he is a rebellious prophet.

When Hurricane Fran swept through our county overnight a few years ago, my wife said to me the next morning, “Honey, you slept through Hurricane Fran; you snored your way right through it.”

Hey, that has got to be a spiritual gift! What a way to ride out a storm!

Jonah has a “Do Not Disturb” sign on his door for the sailors, and a “Do Not Disturb” sign on his heart for God.

He is snoring through the storm of the century. Verse 6 tells us,

So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you are sleeping? . . .”

Literally, he is asking, “How is it that you can sleep through this storm?”

In the latter part of verse 6, the captain says,

“ . . . Get up, call on your god. . . .”

When faced with natural disasters, it is amazing how religious pagans can become.

Suddenly these old salts are praying fervent prayers. And the captain wants to make sure he has every base covered. He is sure some god is behind

this storm and he wants to make sure he has every god covered.

The captain probably grabbed Jonah by his lapels and pulled him to his feet and barked, “Wake up, man! Start praying to whatever god you believe in.”

Then, for the first time, Jonah feels the reeling and rocking of the boat; he hears the wind screeching; he feels the shuddering of the timber – and he senses their mortal danger.

In a flash Jonah puts two and two together and immediately knows which god is behind the storm. He has run from God and God has been waiting for him to arrive.

God is always ahead of us, behind us, beside us, and beneath us. Wherever we run, He is already there.

Jonah is, in fact, the only man on board who knows the true and living God, but at the moment, he is not on speaking terms. There is no doubt in my mind that Jonah can hear the voice of God in the howling of the wind.^{vi}

Let us make one more observation from Scene One. Notice what the captain says at the end of verse 6.

“ . . . Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.”

In other words, “Why aren’t you praying to your god?”

It is interesting, is it not, that the pagans will hold the believer to a higher standard than the believer will for himself at times.

This captain urges Jonah, “Maybe your god will feel sorry for us.”

Do not miss this irony. This old salt spoke words that were like salt in Jonah’s prodigal heart. I believe it hit him like a bag of bricks.

The very thing Jonah did not want God to do for the pagan Ninevites is the very thing he is now being asked to pray about for these pagans.

Jonah has resigned from the service of God because he does not want God to feel sorry for the Ninevites. Now he is in the middle of a storm that is about to take the ship to the bottom of the sea and he is being asked to pray that God will feel sorry for them.

It was supposed to be the same prayer request of an obedient prophet in the distant land of Nineveh as is now requested on the Mediterranean Sea.

Jonah will not pray it. He will not pray this way for them either.

“Did you not read the sign, “Do Not Disturb My Life”? Why can’t I just hide away? Why can’t I just be left alone?”

This is a prodigal prophet.

The second scene now opens and shifts our focus from Jonah below deck to Jonah on deck.

Scene Two: Don’t Ask!

The pagans on deck are calling a prayer meeting and it is not working. So they move to the next thing that they are more familiar with, which is throwing dice. Look at Jonah 1:7.

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.

We see these pagans and these dice, which are perhaps small stones since the corresponding Arabic word means “pebbles”. Stones, pebbles, dice, colored balls, and pieces of wood of different lengths could be used to “cast lots”.^{vii}

The one with the longest piece of wood or the colored stone after the stones were chosen would be the winner – and Jonah wins.

He has to be thinking, “Good grief! What is this, my lucky day?”

As soon as Jonah draws the longest straw, he is besieged by a flurry of questions. Notice verse 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?”

Can you imagine this scene? The wind is whipping across the deck and the ship is rolling up and down huge waves. They are hardly able to stand, rain-drenched, and drawing straws – and the lot falls to the stranger who has kept to himself.

The first question could be rendered, “What have you done?”

Then notice the next question, “What is your occupation?”

This is the last question Jonah ever wants to answer – he is running from this question.

Jonah’s attitude is, “Don’t ask! I’m here to get away from my occupation!”

Can you believe it – God has pinned him down at sea?!

“Jonah, it’s obviously your god who is upset. This incredible storm is from some god and now that we know it’s your god, what did you do to bring this on; what do you do for a living?”

Jonah can no longer say with authority and conviction, “I am a prophet of God.”

It is a wonderful thing, is it not, when you are doing something right and good and somebody asks, “Hey, are you by any chance a Christian?”

Have you ever done anything wrong and someone has said, “Hey, I thought you were a Christian?”

It is a tragic thing when a believer’s sin is exposed to the watching world.

Jonah answers in verse 9.

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

I am amazed by this. Jonah is still maintaining his composure; his cool detachment from their panic as if he is on the good side. And do not miss the fact that his answer is perfect theology, but utter hypocrisy.

. . . “I am a Hebrew . . .” – this is true.

“. . . and I fear [am in awe of and in compliance with] the Lord God of heaven...” – at this moment, nothing could be further from the truth.

Jonah knows this part of his answer is not true. He has responded with the right answer – as if he does not want to add to his crimes – but what hypocrisy.

According to a *Chicago Sun-Times* article, Nita Friedman did not seem the type of person to be involved in a police pursuit, but she was. After Police Chief Mike Hutter attempted to pull her over for a traffic violation, she refused to stop. Even after flipping on his lights and siren, instead of pulling over, this sixty-six year old woman pulled away. Police followed her through three counties and the chase did not end until the State Police put a spike strip in the road in front of Friedman’s car. After driving over it and having three of her tires go flat, she tried to keep going. However, escape became impossible and she finally pulled over and stopped.

What astounded the police, and caught my attention, was the fact that throughout the entire ordeal, Ms. Friedman never went over the speed limit. She observed all the traffic laws, even stopping

at one point behind a vehicle that was making a left turn. What irony – while running from the law, this woman was determined not to break the law.^{viii}

Jonah is trying not to discredit God, while at the same time, disobeying God. He is careful to acknowledge that Yahweh is the God of the land and sea, while at the same time, attempting to flee by land and sea.

Evidently these sailors pulled more out of Jonah than this simple answer because verse 10 tells us,

... the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

This is the reason they have erupted in verse 10 by saying,

... “How could you do this?” ...

These sailors immediately see through Jonah’s foolish hypocrisy. “Jonah, you say your God made the land and sea, so let’s see now, where are we? Oh, we’re on the sea. That’s just great! Now what?”

It is tragic, is it not, when pagans can see it and prophets cannot? It is tragic when the world exposes the sins of Christians that Christians have attempted to hide.

Scene One is, “Don’t Disturb!”

Scene Two is, “Don’t Ask!”

Now Scene Three will open.

Scene Three: Don’t Turn Around!

In other words, “I’m still not going back toward Nineveh.”

Notice Jonah 1:11.

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.

So the sea was bad before, but now it is worse.

What these pagans missed was motive. They thought Jonah was running away from his God because he had done something – they did not know he was running away from God because he would not do something. They thought Jonah had done something wrong – they did not know he was refusing to do something right.

Then Jonah stuns them by offering this solution in verse 12,

... “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.”

We would expect them to pick up Jonah and toss him into the waves at once, right? These old salts want to sail again. Note their actions in verse 13.

However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.

We read that these men “rowed desperately”. This Hebrew phrase can be rendered, “they dug in” with all their might to save not only their lives, but also Jonah’s life.

Again, do not miss the irony in this. Jonah would not lift a finger to save the lives of the pagan Ninevites, but these idol worshipping sailors are putting their lives on the line to save his.

Can you imagine how convicted this prodigal prophet felt as unbelievers fought to save his life when he had run from saving the lives of others?

Their rowing was of no use, so these pagans pray out of desperation to Yahweh in verse 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.”

This is a pretty incredible prayer for salty pagan sailors. Do not miss the fact that there is something happening in their lives, which I will come back to in a moment.

Look at verse 15.

So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.

Notice that Jonah did not offer to repent to God. There is no quick prayer. There is no request to turn the boat around and allow him to follow God again.

What an incredible downward spiral. Jonah is so stubborn and rebellious that he who once thought the Ninevites should not be allowed to live is willing to end his own life. Rather than surrender to God, he forfeits his own life.

Now for the average Christian this does not seem that dramatic, but it is. When we walk away from obedience to God, we end a life worth living. We forfeit a full reward (II John 1:8).

Prodigals waste their lives.

As far as Jonah, the prodigal prophet, is concerned, he would rather die now than see the Ninevites come to life later.

Now, as soon as Jonah hits the water, the sea grows calm. Notice verse 16.

Then the men feared the Lord greatly . . .

Oh? What does it mean to fear the Lord? Jonah said earlier that he feared the Lord, but he did not.

Now these sailors say they fear the Lord greatly, and notice the rest of verse 16,

. . . they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

One Hebrew scholar wrote, “This phrase could be understood – they promised to serve Him. These are terms of conversion to Israel’s religion and the recognition that Yahweh alone is the one true God.”^{ix}

This scene closes with even greater irony.

Jonah refuses to keep his prophetic vows to worship and serve God, and these converted pagans are now making vows to worship and serve God.

This is no foxhole conversion. Mark the fact that these vows are made, not during the storm as a promise that they will convert if the storm ends, but after the storm is over.^x

After these sailors have been delivered, they promise God to serve Him as God alone.

Imagine this revival – and Jonah missed it.

Prodigals miss the good times of God’s Spirit because they are focused on not having their own way with God’s Spirit.

There are two revivals in this journal and Jonah will effectively miss them both.

Now Jonah is effectively discarded – dumped overboard like the cheap cargo. When we choose not to follow God, our lives are cheapened. Jonah is worth nothing more than cheap baggage.

The truth of God’s grace

The wonderful truth of God’s grace is twofold in this.

1. First, God’s grace is revealed in that even when Jonah was disobedient, God used his words for His glory.

Who would have ever thought the conversion of these pagan sailors possible? It is the revival in this little book that is most often overlooked.

In spite of himself, Jonah was used as a messenger for the gospel of God.

2. Secondly, God’s grace is displayed in that although Jonah is discarded by these sailors, he is not discarded by God.

God has a fish almost ready to move in.

I will say that had I been God, I would have sent a shark – a big one; big enough to swallow Jonah whole. I would have made sure Jonah lived, but he would have teeth marks so that he would never forget.

The good news in this is that while Jonah wants to forget about God, God has not forgotten about Jonah.

Jonah has given up – God has not.

I imagine as Jonah hit the cold water in the Mediterranean Sea and felt the waves immediately calm down, he probably thought, “I’ve blown it. There’s no hope for me now. I’ll never see the light of day again.”

Jonah is in for a surprise from a gracious God who loves even prodigal sons.

At this moment, as Jonah is treading water, the lights are suddenly turned off.

Can you imagine this? Jonah knew he was alive because he could hear his heart beating. And he was cold and wet. However, he could not see anything.

Jonah thought this would be the end of his life, but it is only the end of Scene Three. And for Jonah and his relationship with God, this is the beginning of the best part.

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ⁱ Associate Press, May 30, 2003, <http://preachingtoday.com>.

ⁱⁱ Trent C. Butler, Holman Old Testament Commentary: Hosea-Micah (Holman Reference, 2005), p. 273.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brynmor F. Price and Eugene A. Nida, A Handbook of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah (United Bible Societies, 1978), p. 56.

^{iv} William L. Banks, Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet (Moody Press, 1966), p. 24.

^v Ibid., p. 57.

^{vi} John Phillips, Exploring the Minor Prophets (Kregel, 1998), p. 143.

^{vii} Banks, p. 30.

^{viii} “Driver Leads Cops on 15-Mile Chase,” Chicago Sun-Times (Dec. 2, 2004).

^{ix} David J. Clark and Eugene A. Nida, A Handbook on the Books on Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah (United Bible Society, 1978), p. 71.

^x James Montgomery Boice, The Minor Prophets: Volume 1 (Baker Books, 1983), p. 279.