

# The Prophet's Refusal

## Jonah 1:1-17

"Your servant is here, Lord. Speak and I will hear." "Here am I, send me..." Those are the words of prophets like Samuel and Isaiah. These were men of God poised to respond to God's voice with submission and obedience.

Hebrews 11 is full of men and women who believed and obeyed God. They took Him at His Word and put their wealth, their families and their lives on the line. Abraham heard God's call to leave his homeland and left, not knowing yet where he was going.

Christian history is full of stories of men and women of faith at risk of life obeying the commission to make disciples of all nations. All over the world, today, men and women make small and large choices of obedience in the face of great dangers and deadly opposition.

But Jonah? Not so much... That would be our first assumption. To us, there is even some sympathy for him if this is the case... But whoever heard of running from an assignment because it might succeed?

It does lead us to a question? Why is this book here? One writer replies that, "An assessment of the content of the book, in its context and in the light of the insights of the New Testament, suggests three main purposes of the prophecy of Jonah: the first was to stir up the people of God; the second to declare the message of salvation to the nations beyond Israel; and the third, and most fundamental, to foreshadow something of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ in a very specific way." Keddie, p.

Will we find ourselves here? No one here is a prophet... No one here today lives in Israel... No one here today will have a direct, authoritative command from God with a specific message to say to a specific group of people... Why do we care about this book? It is an amazing story that will have attentive children on the edge of their seats. Maybe even some of our teens will stop playing video games during the sermon to be grabbed by the wild and strange story of Jonah. But I suspect many will be looking in a mirror – they will see themselves and will deflect the painful image the Spirit shows them in the Word.

## The Prophet and the Sovereign Lord (v. 1-3)

As we listen to this text, we are meant to ask ourselves, "What is Jonah thinking? Why does he run?"

<sup>1</sup> Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."

<sup>3</sup> But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

### *God's Sovereign Sending (v. 1-2)*

God's Word comes to the prophet of God. That word is usually a word to speak. But now the word is a command. God is sending Jonah to go where God wants. This begins the conflict all of us struggle with.

God's Word is in conflict with our wants. At the end of the day, Jonah does not want to do what God is telling him to do.

God's will is in conflict with our will. Now we can and often are at odds with God's revealed will. We have His Word which tells what He requires. So, will we bend our wills to God's?

This calls for submission and obedience. We believe the what and why of God's will and we do it. We submit our wants to His express desires. It is not that we do what God requires while still not wanting it; we must turn our desires so that they want what God wants.

God is not in Nineveh. His saving presence is not there, yet. This is the sense of the call to Jonah. The presence of God will go to Nineveh in the Word, in the preaching of the prophet. But it will be a message of wrath, of coming judgment. This is a huge theme in the Bible. Salvation comes through judgment. Without judgment there can be no salvation, no forgiveness, no reconciliation. Justice must be wielded through judgment. Once justice is met, salvation is possible.

Go and prophesy in Nineveh. This will bring the saving presence of God. This is what the preaching of the Word of God does. Jonah is to go to Nineveh and proclaim God's Word. This is why we are to go into all the world and preach the gospel. As we go with the Word, the saving presence and power and purposes of God go. Thus, His kingdom is spread into all the people groups. HE assures us He will be with us in the ends of the earth unto end of the age.

### ***The Prophet's Sinful Running (v. 3-4)***

God is not in Tarshish. This is Jonah's conclusion. He is running from the presence of the Lord. In his thinking, God must not be in Tarshish, Spain. Now obviously we cannot run from the omnipresence of the Lord. But there is a kind of folly that says we can be where God is not.

The prophet will run away. He goes to the port of Joppa. There is a ship bound for Tarshish, Spain. You can hear his thinking, can't you? "This must be the will of God! Here is an open door. God's providence has provided a ship going the way I want to go." Listen, it is possible to rebel against the revealed will of God and disobey His commands. It is not possible to be outside of His power, purposes and providences. You can disobey God's commands, His revealed will. But you cannot be outside His sovereign will.

To leave the presence of the Lord is to remove yourself from the place of obedience, service and blessing. The way this is spoken elsewhere in the Old Testament makes it plain. Those who go out of the presence of God do so in disobedience, often in self-focused pursuits thinking to be safe. Like Jonah, we often choose courses of action that we know keep us from doing the hard things God wants or from accomplishing God's agenda that we really don't like.

But while buying a ticket on a cargo ship to go in the opposite direction of obedience seems safe, certain peril awaits. God's chastening may move slow. God's chastening may seem way down the path if at all. But it is sure. It will come. The training and transforming work of a sovereign God and loving Father will move at exactly the right time, in exactly the right way to effect exactly what He purposes.

Never forget, what happened to Old Testament people and how those stories were written down are for us. They are both types and examples. They foreshadow the great realities in Christ and in the New Covenant age. They highlight the commands of God so that we will not follow the sad and sorry example of disobedience.

## The Prophet and the Pagan Sailors (v. 4-16)

How do we know that? Keep reading...

The whole story of Jonah follows Hebrew literary parallelism. Most of the pieces of the story do as well. Consider this helpful diagram of the structure from

### *Sleeping in False Comfort (v. 4-6)*

<sup>4</sup> But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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."

Jonah may run, but God will pursue. The Lord hurls a storm upon the sea. The storm threatens to swamp the boat. It cannot handle the wind and waves. The disobedience of one prophet has brought danger and difficulty at least to a ship of people if not others on the sea. While some may question whether this is fair, God is sovereign in His freedom to choose whatever course is wise, holy and good.

The sailors in desperate attempts to save their lives, hurl the cargo into the sea. Maybe a lighter ship will float higher in the water and not be so easily swamped and drug down. So, they are hauling the cargo up from the hold. With the wind and rain and running waves, they throw all the can overboard.

Jonah is cargo. He has gone down into the lower part of the ship. The deck of a pitching ship in a storm is no place for an inexperienced passenger. He is no help. He has made himself a bed or possibly there are hammocks in the hold – nevertheless, there he is, asleep. What is he doing? How can he possibly be asleep? Is this ignorance, he has no idea of how dangerous their situation is? Is this escape? Is he like many who hide out in sleep to be safe from overwhelming troubles?

The captain of the ship finds Jonah. Pardon me if I imagine a bit of sailor's vocabulary as it rains down on Jonah's head. How can he possibly be asleep? Doesn't he care? If he can't help with the cargo at least he can call on his gods to save them. The sailors are casting over the cargo and calling out to their gods. Do you hear the absurdity of believing in multiple gods? So, what if one of them caused the storm? What if another one is trying to prevent the storm? What if no one is listening? What if the storm is just nature and the gods are off going to the toilet (a' la' Elijah – look it up)?

### *Seeking Someone to Blame (v. 3-10)*

In a world where the gods are always punishing people for misdeeds, the sailors now look for someone to blame.

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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?" <sup>9</sup> 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." <sup>10</sup> 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.

They decide to cast lots. We don't know what kind of lot casting this is. Dice? Pick the short or long straw? Spin the bottle? It doesn't tell us. The one thing about casting lots - it will land on someone. Whether true or not, someone's number is going to come up. Someone has the short straw. The bottle will stop spinning and point to someone. So, this is not, "Is there someone to blame?" This will point to someone who will be blamed. In the storm, with wind and rain and pitching boat, with sinking certain, lots are cast.

Of course, we are Christian readers of our Bibles, right? We know as soon as they decide to do this that there is only one person that this is going to land on. The sovereign Lord will make the lot that is cast point to the culprit. It does.

The inquisition begins. Who is he? What does he do? Where is he from? What has he done? Why is this happening to them?

Listen again to what Jonah says. Listen to his confession. "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." I am a Jew. I am a Yahweh fearer. My God is the true God of heaven, the creator God who made the sea (which is about to destroy us) and the dry land (which we yearn for)." We do not know the nationality of these sailors. We do know they were pagan. However, they had just sailed from Joppa, one the largest port cities on Israel's Mediterranean coast. They are probably carrying cargo from Israel bound for Europe. They knew who the God of the Israelites was. Jonah is not confessing an unknown deity of some unknown power of some uncertain character.

Fear of the sea now becomes fear of the Creator. What marks the pagans through this part of the story is how much they are driven and controlled by fear. Now they are truly afraid. Their response to learning of Jonah's disobedience and flight is a marked contrast to the sleepy unconcern of a prophet of the Lord. They are experiencing the wrath of God. They are living through it because they are connected to the one being pursued by the Lord of the earth and the sea.

### ***Sacrificing One to Save Them All (v. 11-16)***

What must be done?

<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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." <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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." <sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

The obvious question for Jonah is, "What should we do? How can we appease your God so that He will calm the storm?"

Notice what Jonah does not say. He does not suggest that he repent and return to Joppa so that he can actually obey and continue on the mission. Does that surprise you? It does me. The reason the Lord has sent the storm is not because Jonah is on the boat.

Chastening is happening because Jonah has disobeyed. So, this prophet of God is just like many of us. We are trying to solve the chastening and consequences our sin has caused; we are not focused on repenting of the sin itself.

Notice what Jonah recommends. Frankly, this is just exactly what the pagans would do. The sea and storm god needs to be appeased. Let us throw into the sea a sacrifice. Why does Jonah think this will work? He has no revelation directing this. He has no assurance that this will calm the sea. And if this is his advice, why not just dive into the sea himself. Why tell them to hurl him into the sea? It seems to me that Jonah does not expect them to do this. They will be committing murder and *prophetacide*. Even a pagan can see that this will probably anger the God even more.

And look at what they tried to do. They don't want to kill Jonah. They are out in the sea. No one is going to rescue him. To throw him into the sea is certain death. Even their own consciences prevent them initially from taking Jonah's counsel. So, they row even harder. Rather than sacrifice they work harder. The harder they rowed, the wilder the storm became.

Finally, they do what they must do.

They cry out to the Lord. This verse is very interesting. Frankly, there is an astonishing knowledge of Yahweh in their plea. "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." It is hard to detect initially whether this is feeble attempt at self-preservation or a believing acknowledgment of the true God. Given how this ends, I think this is a first, feeble glimmer of faith. They know that God is sovereign and holy and holds people accountable for sin. They also have the seemingly sure word of the Lord's prophet. Their own efforts have not saved them, and the storm has worsened. Obeying the voice of the prophet seems the best course.

They hurl Jonah into the sea. Simple, incredible sentence. The sailors advance on Jonah, gather him up and throw Jonah overboard. Don't miss a repeated word. The Lord *hurled* a storm upon the sea. In desperation the sailors *hurled* the cargo overboard. Jonah tells them to *hurl* him into the sea. Finally, the sailors *hurl* Jonah into the sea.

Immediately, the sea calmed. It stopped its raging. The great maw of God's chastening waves swallows the disobedient prophet. Immediate calm and peace ensues. The sacrifice of one man has saved the lives of many.

The pagan sailors greatly feared the Lord. They made sacrifices and vows to him (v.16). They have experienced the power of God's anger. They have seen the effect of that anger satisfied. Jonah has his first pagan converts. They turn in worship, not to just "God" in the general sense of Deity, but to the Lord.

They fear the Lord. The fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom. Genuine faith respects and reverences God. Yes, their fear may be a fear of what God can do. But it is the kind of fear that pleases the Lord.

They offer sacrifices to the Lord. This is the normal response of faith in the Old Testament. Their response to God's saving initiative is to do what is expected of them in that moment.

They make vows to the Lord. These are not promises to try to persuade God to save them or to do what they want. These promises are the result of the fear of God and faith in God.

**Trajectory – towards the New Testament.**

There is a story in the New Testament that alludes to this one in Jonah. Luke and Mark both record this story Luke's telling of the same events places it immediately after this in **Luke 8:19–21**

Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you." But he answered them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

**Mark 4:35–41**

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

The connection seems to be made in that Jonah and Jesus are both asleep in a boat in the midst of the storm.

Jonah's is the sleep of the unconcerned, running sinner oblivious of his danger...

Jonah is at the mercy of the wind and the waves...

Jonah is hurled into the face of the storm to save the believing pagans...

Jesus' is the sleep of believing saint trusting the promises of God in spite his danger...

Jesus has the authority over the wind and the waves...

God hurls His wrath on Jesus to save us all...

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## **Reflect and Respond**

A time is coming when, in the words of Isaiah, 'The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance" ' (Isaiah 19:25). The message of God's saving grace is going out to the whole world!

Jesus Christ is the heart of the message of life in the book of Jonah. We are given a glorious panorama of God's redemptive love as he reaches out to a fallen world. It is life for the spiritually dead. It is eternal life. It is, in the fulness of New Testament revelation, life in Jesus Christ.

There are many clear paths to Jesus from Jonah. What we have seen so far is a contrast, an opposite, a foil. Jesus is not like Jonah. Jesus is the true and obedient prophet. He was sent by God into the world. He did come to do His Father's will. Doing that will meant enormous hardship and suffering. It finally brought Jesus to death, to die on a cross.

Will you believe this message of mercy? Do you obey God's words of command?