

The Accidental Missionary

Jonah 1:4-16

Our story evening is one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible. It is like a play which captures, in miniature, the great drama of human history. All the primary participants are here: the lost and ruined race, represented by the sailors; the church of God, represented by Jonah; and the one true, creating, and saving Lord of heaven and earth.

One of the unique aspects of this text is that the primary human actors are the sailors, the pagans. We are watching this drama unfold through their eyes: we are told of their behavior, given insight into their emotions, and listen to their questions as they come face to face with the living God through his disobedient prophet. It's a wonderful conversion story. And therein lies the irony and tragedy.

The pagans seem much more sensitive to the reality of God than the prophet. And that is why this a tragic story. God rescues the pagan sailors – but the prophet gets judgement. Here we learn why Israel will be cast out of the land of promise. Like Jonah being hurled out of the ship into the sea of wrath, Israel will be hurled out of the land of promise for the very same reason – they failed to take up and carry out God's gospel mission in the world.

This dramatic play is easily divided into three separate acts structured around the theme of the sailors' fear. (1:5, 10, 16) We will study each act by paying attention to the separate actors:

- What are they doing in this scene?
- What is God doing?
- What are the sailors doing?
- What is Jonah doing?

And in every instance, we will find each party acting according to their nature – just being and revealing who they truly are.

I. Act I

A. What is God Doing?

1:4 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.

The text clearly tells us in verse 4 that God is at work. What is he doing?

1. **He is responding to Jonah's disobedience.** We saw that last week. God is interrupting Jonah's plan of escape, interrupting Jonah's devastating decision to deny God and flee to Tarshish. But that isn't all God is doing.
2. **He is Revealing his eternal nature and sovereign power to the sailors.** The beauty of this story is that God is just being God as he relates to this world. Specifically, he is revealing himself as the living God through this storm.

How do great storms happen? The meteorologist will tell you about pressure systems and jet streams and vortexes – and all of those things are true. They are all the secondary causes behind storms. But

here we see that there is a primary cause: the hand and will of the living God. In that sense, this is not a unique storm. Every storm obeys the will of its Creator.

Psalm 148:7 Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word!

God is commanding the stormy wind to carry out his sovereign purposes and revealing his divine nature in the things he has made. This is just what Paul says in **Romans 1:18-20**:

1:18–20 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

This is what God is doing in the storm. He is revealing the reality of his eternal power and divine nature to a lost and perishing world.

B. What are the Sailors Doing?

The sailors are men of the world and are a perfect picture of the world at large. They came from different countries, cultures, religions, and ethnic backgrounds. They are all Gentiles and pagans of the purest sort. Sailors were generally notorious for their wickedness – sort of like Nineveh on water. But they are about to come face to face with the living God.

The first thing we are told about the sailors is that they were afraid (v. 5). Notice, they weren't afraid when they left the harbor. They were very content and confident. Their boat was their world and they were confident that their skill was sufficient to keep their world safe. Just like the world of sinful men, confident that we are able to provide for ourselves and protect ourselves and manage our world for our benefit.

But when judgement comes, all that confidence is revealed as utter folly. These skilled and capable men suddenly find themselves utterly helpless in the storm of God's wrath. As their ship, their world, begins to literally come apart, they are terrified. They are used to storms. But in this great storm they sense the reality of death. And in the face of death, they are willing to do anything to live.

1:5 And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.

This cargo was their business, their life savings, their wages for the year. As Jesus said, "What will a man give in return for his soul?" In their fear of death, they are willing to give everything they have and own. But it isn't enough. The storm continues unabated and the ship continues to fall apart. In their moment of peril, "they each cried out to his own god."

There is a deep, deep sadness to this scene. These are men made in the image of God, about to perish in the waters of judgement, and they have no idea where to find true help. Like the world they represent, they cried out to gods that are not gods, gods who do not exist and cannot save. They don't know the true God. How could they? They have been born and raised in spiritual darkness. All they know are the gods they were taught. "How shall they believe him whom they have never heard?" No

one has told them how to be rescued from wrath by grace and through faith in the God of Scripture. And so, they face eternal death with no hope. And it is this that makes Jonah's actions so appalling.

C. What is Jonah Doing?

1:5 But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

God is being true to his nature as the living God. The sailors are being true to their nature as lost men. And, unfortunately, Jonah is being true to his nature. Jonah's nature is revealed in his priorities, and his priorities are revealed in his actions.

- His priority isn't obeying the will and word of God.
- His priority isn't helping save the ship. He isn't concerned about the plight of these men. They are just pagans. Gentile dogs. Jonah has been self-righteously ignoring pagans like this all his life. He has no sense of any responsibility to them in their danger.

What is Jonah's priority? Himself. Getting some rest. And it's going quite well. He was "fast asleep." Just like Israel, the people of God.

They lived in the midst of a world that was perishing. A world of men and women under the judgment of God. And they, like Jonah, had a call from God, a call to be a light to the nations; to shine out, in this dark world, the glory of the living God who saves the helpless sinner. But those things were not Israel's priority. They cared only for themselves. They were fast asleep in the midst of a dying world.

Isn't this true of so much of the church? Isn't it true, in many ways, for us?

Jonah wakes up to a sharp rebuke: "**What do you mean, you sleeper?**" It's a very pointed rebuke. "What's wrong with you? How can you possibly be fast asleep when we are perishing?" "*Arise. Call out to your god. Perhaps he will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.*" These men are desperate to be saved – and Jonah lies fast asleep. And that's the close of Act 1.

II. Act II

Act two begins with the sailors.

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."

A. The Sailors

What are they doing? They are trying to make sense of this great calamity. One of the most common human responses to suffering is to ask, "Why? Why is this happening?" The sailors are clearly trying to figure that out – and they have made some progress. They have wisely determined that this sort of storm is the act of an angry god, and the cause must be human sin. If they can determine who is responsible, who has committed the evil, they may be able to pacify the offended god.

And so they cast lots (basically rolling dice), trusting that the gods will show them who has sinned.

1:7 ...and the lot fell to Jonah.

Isn't that tragic? What an indictment on Jonah and God's sinful people. There were maybe twenty pagan men on that ship – and one Israelite; twenty men who knew nothing of God, and one who did. But when it came to the source of evil, the cause of offense, the lot fell to Jonah. It wasn't the pagans who raised the wrath of God, it was the prophet.

And so they began their questions.

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?"

They are trying to ascertain the nature of his sin and what god he has offended. Whatever it was, it must be awful. The sin must be exceedingly grievous because the god is clearly, deeply offended and is about to destroy all of them. "Jonah, what wicked, vile, awful thing have you done to so offend your God?"

B. Jonah

What does Jonah do? He tells them his story, but in a way that is very telling itself.

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."

In the original language, the word "Hebrew" is first for emphasis: "Hebrew I am." His identity is wrapped up in his ethnic distinctive. "I am a descendant of Abraham." That is how he sees himself. That is what is important to him.

This was how Israelites saw themselves. This was their boast, their pride, their confidence. Remember when Jesus was rebuking the Pharisees, saying that they were children of the Devil? They replied, "Abraham is our father" (John 8:39).

When Jonah does mention his religion, it is somewhat of a boast: "I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

This was the great sin of Israel – they **boasted** in their faith instead of **sharing** it. Their faith was their pride. They believed in the right God, the true God, the God who made the heavens and the earth. And, of course, it was true. God was the God of heaven. He did make the sea and dry land.

The lie was not concerning God but concerning Jonah. He professes to fear the Lord, but his actions prove without a shadow of a doubt that he doesn't! God's complaint against Israel was just this: "These people profess me with their mouth, but their hearts are far from me." That's certainly the case with Jonah – and with Israel.

Here is the fatal flaw of their profession. They believe the right things about God, but they don't live in keeping with what they profess to believe. Their faith became a source of pride, which made them look

down on the pagans instead of humbly speaking the gospel to them. This is the great sin of Jonah and Israel. And possibly of Harvest?

C. What is God Doing?

God is revealing Jonah's sin, and Israel's sin, before the watching world. The lot fell to Jonah because the Lord controls the lot and made it fall there. This was the divine finger of God pointing directly to Jonah as the wicked man, the offending party, the cause of this judgment. As much as this book is the revelation of the missionary heart of God, it is also a book of the missionary failure of Israel – and God's just anger because of it.

The scene closes with the heightened terror of the men.

1:10 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.

When the story began, they were afraid of the storm. Now they are "exceedingly afraid." Why? They have come face to face with the reality of the God of Israel – a mighty and holy God. They may easily have heard something of Israel's God, a God who was terrifying in his anger. This God had destroyed mighty Egypt by the word of his mouth. What hope did this little pagan ship have in the face of such a mighty God? What could they do to be saved from the righteous and terrifying anger of this holy God?

Notice their fear in the question they ask Jonah: "**What have you done?**" This is after Jonah had told them what he had done! They are gripped with fear by the reality of sin, the reality of Jonah's rebellion and flagrant disobedience before the living God. They realize that the wrath of the storm is the evidence of the wrath of a holy God against sin!

It is only when men and women come face to face with the reality of their sin in the presence of the irrefutable power and unrelenting holiness of God that they will begin to ask the appropriate and necessary question: **what must we do to be saved?**

III. Act III

1:11 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.

The holy and mighty God of the Hebrews stood against them because of Jonah's sin. "How can we solve the problem of sin?" That's the question. What act must be performed? What shall we do to you Jonah? How do we make right your wrong? What does your God require to remove guilt and turn away wrath?

The answer stunned them.

1:12 He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you...."

Jonah knows the answer to the question. He knows that this storm was the expression of God's holy wrath against his sin. And from his Bible he knows that divine wrath can only be satisfied and turned away by satisfying the demands of justice. The wages of sin must be paid – and the wages of sin is

death. “Throw me overboard.” The only way these men can be saved is through offering up Jonah as a “propitiatory sacrifice” – a sacrifice which is able to turn away God’s holy wrath and bring them into peace with God.

We can tell the sailors were shocked by this answer because they didn’t do it.

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.

It didn’t seem possible to them that there was no other way to avoid death. And so they recommitted themselves to trying to save themselves by their own efforts.

This is precisely a picture of the world. There in that boat we see the world – men from every nation and from all different religions, all hoping to find some other way to solve the problem of sin, some other way to escape the just penalty of death, some other way to be saved other than a propitiatory sacrifice.

But it was impossible.

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.” So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

The language of the text shows that these men are coming to faith.

- They “called out to the LORD.” This is the distinguishing mark of God's people.
- Having abandoned all hope of saving themselves, they cast all their hope on the Lord.
- They are concerned not to sin: “...lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.”
- They acknowledge the LORD as the only true God. That phrase “as it has pleased you” appears only three times in the Old Testament. Every time it is an acknowledgment of God as the true God in contrast to all false gods.

Psalm 115:3-4 Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

These pagan sailors have come to profess the God of Israel as the only true God.

- They found grace through the sacrifice. “They picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea” – and the sacrifice was effective. “The sea ceased from its raging.” The wind ceased. The sunshine broke through. The sea became glass. All was at peace.

What was God doing?

God was illustrating the core truths of the gospel. The vilest sinners can be saved through the death of another. God has made a way for sinners to be rescued from the just wrath they deserve through a sin-bearing, propitiatory sacrifice. In **Romans 3:25**, Paul tells us that God put forward Jesus, his Son, “as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” In this story, God is showing us his glorious intent of reconciling the world to himself through the atoning death of his Son!

What were the sailors doing? They were coming to a saving faith and reverential worship.

1:16 Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

This is reverential fear mingled with deep joy and delight in God as the God who saves.

What was Jonah doing?

Sinking beneath the waves of divine judgement. This is God prophesying what would soon happen to Israel. They would soon disappear from the earth under the just wrath of God. Why? Because they refused to do the mission of God.

Note the great irony of this story - Jonah the prophet, who refused to be used as God's instrument of grace for the pagan Ninevites, finds himself being used as God's instrument of grace for these pagan sailors.

The great concern of the story. The great sin of this tale is Jonah's sin.

- He was commanded by God to declare God's word to the nations.
- He was in the midst of lost and dying men, men God desired and determined to save. But he had no concern for their soul. And God was angry.

Boice makes the point that God will save his elect and he will do it either with us or without us. But if he does it without us, we get no joy and no reward for any of it.

I would go a step further. Any church that will not shine its light will, at some point, lose its light. God has given us a mission in this world. If we will not engage in it, we are inviting the anger of God and the loss of our covenant privileges. Why should God continue to show grace to us and our children if we show no concern for his lost and wandering children?

Notice the great wonder of this story. God has provided a way for great sinners to be rescued by the sacrifice of one man. Jesus was without sin – but all the sins of God's elect were laid upon him. And as he died, sinking beneath the waves of divine judgment, we were set free. The sacrifice is sufficient. The sea is calmed. God's justice is satisfied, and he is free to shine the sunshine of his face upon sinners who have been saved by his grace.