

# How to Calm the Sea

January 10, 2021

Jonah 1:11-16

We continue this morning in our study of the book of Jonah. Thanks to Pastor Zach for taking a piece of this study while Joan and I were gone. But to correct the record, he was supposed to get this week's passage, but we had a change of plans in our family and had to leave a week early. So, I didn't saddle him with some difficult passage. It just worked out that way on the schedule. And I could spend my time this morning correcting all that he said last week... no, he did a great job and he set me up well for this week's message.

But I take the time here to reset the situation so we can pick up our study with understanding. God has His people, the Jewish people. They are rather powerless against the gigantic empires of the day, in this case the Assyrian empire centered in a city called Nineveh, in modern day Iraq. As Zach put it so well last week, they were notoriously evil and had a history of taking out their evil desires on God's people. They were really, really despicable people!

So, God communicates to His spokesman, His prophet Jonah, to go to Nineveh and preach out against it, that God had had it with their evil. He was about to take action against them. For reasons we have not yet encountered in the text, Jonah refuses to go. In fact, he makes a statement by going as far as he can in the opposite direction from Nineveh. He gets on a ship to Spain. Well, the next scene comes when a storm comes up on the Mediterranean Sea, a fierce storm, a rather unexpected storm. The sailors respond by calling for a time when each sailor cries out to his own god. It doesn't work. They lighten the load by throwing cargo overboard (hint, hint). But that doesn't work. It seems that everything they do only makes the situation worse. There is something spiritual about this storm.

They remember that there was onboard a passenger, who was sleeping through all of this. They wake him up and tell him to call on HIS God. Maybe HIS God is the One who is angry with them. Then they decide that the God of

this storm might just have power over things we often view as chance. They cast lots, or in our world, they roll dice or draw straws. This angry god might just tell them whose god is angry with them. The lot fell on Jonah. Sure enough, this strange human cargo was at the center of their problem. As you saw last week, all of a sudden they wanted to know more. Who was he? What did he do for a living? What people was he from? Well, Jonah told them He was a Hebrew, a follower of the LORD, Yahweh, the God who made the earth and the sea.

Now the sailors had the information they needed. It was starting to come together. This Yahweh was the God who was causing the storm. But now they are ticked off at Jonah. As it says in v.10, they knew that Jonah was trying to flee from the presence of this God. And they can't believe he would do such a thing. Instinctively, they knew there is nowhere you can go to flee the God who made all of the earth, all of the sea. Where can you go to flee Him????

So, this ragtag group of pagan sailors has figured out where this storm has come from, who is the God who has sent it, and why this God sent it. But here lies the problem: the person who caused this God to send this storm is standing right in front of them and he is the spokesman for this God. The prophet is the cause, and he's trying to run away from this God! What do you do now? Where do you turn when an angry God and His spokesman are fighting and you are caught in the middle? That's where we pick up the story this morning. Now before I read the text, allow me to set this up another way.

The book of Jonah is all about mercy, who gets it and what our attitude ought to be about such people. By definition, mercy is being treated better than you deserve, right? So, in this text we have the man of God, who knows God, knows Him really, really well. But he is being disobedient to God, really disobedient. And here you have the sailors. They worship all kinds of gods. They only know about this Yahweh, the God of Scripture through Jonah. All they know is the barest facts about this God. His name is Yahweh, He has created the whole world, and He is angry with Jonah. That's all they know. And they only know that because they are in the middle of a life threatening crisis of His creation!

So, who is in a better position here? The one who knows God but is being disobedient, or the ones who only know Him a bit, but they fear Him greatly because of His ability to end their lives. Who's better off? Who gets it? This is where we are in the text, Jonah is continuing on his journey to the bottom, where it will finally turn around when he finds himself at the bottom of the sea, while the sailors are rising in their understanding, faith, and obedience. Who should receive mercy?

There, now let's read the text. READ Jonah 1:11-16. By the way, we are stopping at v. 16 by choice even though the chapter has one more verse. Know that the Hebrew Bible starts chapter 2 at our v. 17.

Main point: Mercy comes to those who fear the LORD and respond to Him by faith.

By definition, extending mercy means the people will not, do not deserve it. If they did, it would not be mercy. We see that demonstrated in a beautiful way in this text. We will see it again with the Ninevites in chapter 3. And God positions us, His people to declare His intent to show mercy to rebellious people. We don't choose such an audience, He does. And if we refuse to follow Him in obedience, we prove that we too deserve to be thrown overboard to lighten the load. And yet, as we will see next week, that act of throwing us overboard might just set us up to receive His mercy as well. We are ALL just rebels in need of God's mercy. Amen?

I. It never works to know what the LORD wants you to do and then try to come up with a better plan! vv. 11-13

Jonah has to learn that lesson several times in this great little book, the sailors seem to learn their lesson the first time.

v.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.

This is just dripping with irony! The LORD is angry at His rebellious spokesman. But the result of His anger impacted them, threatening their lives. So, what do they do? Who would know what they were to do to appease this previously to them unknown God? Jonah! He would know, but he is in full rebellion. Then what? Can you see why Jonah I is one of my favorite chapters in all of Scripture?

Let me paraphrase their question to make a point. They ask Jonah, the man of God, “What must we do to be saved?” Isn’t that interesting? Except for direct action by the LORD they know they will die. So they ask the man of God to tell them what to do. And it seems from the description that the time is getting short, the situation keeps getting worse. The sea is growing more and more tempestuous. The end could come at any moment!

12 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.”

The answer? Throw more cargo overboard. Notice the same word throughout chapter I, “hurl.” Now, I trust it is clear the predicament Jonah in his rebellion has placed them. There is this all-powerful God who is angry. But to appease Him, you must throw overboard this God’s spokesman. Right! That sounds like a good plan! Throw overboard the one who has introduced you to this God. What happens when you harm the man of God? We have examples. What was David’s attitude about Saul, even though Saul was trying to kill him? You don’t harm the Lord’s anointed. Or hear these words from Jeremiah 26. There, Jeremiah warns people wanting to kill him that they do so at their peril. “Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent

blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears.” (Jer. 26:15) No, it’s not a good idea to harm the LORD’s spokesman. . . unless He tells you to. That puts you in a dilemma!

Now, remember that Jonah is not here offering to sacrifice himself for their sake. No, he is not a Christ figure here. He is acting out of rebellion, rebellion until death. He will NOT repent and submit. And he will not stop his rebellion for their sake. He is willing to cause their deaths rather than submit. No, this is a request based on an attitude of full rebellion. He delivered the message of God to them, but he was not going to heed it himself. He would rather die than submit, but he wants them to do it. Ouch! Does Jonah deserve mercy???

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.

There it is, the sailors’ plan B. They determine to row rather than throw. And the wording here indicates a great deal of effort in rowing. Now, we know that the shoreline in a storm is not the place to be. You crash on the rocks or break up on the sandbar like Paul in Acts 27. But perhaps God would see their good faith effort and reward them. After all, they were trying to deliver their cargo safely to port. They were trying to show their regard for this powerful God by refusing to throw His spokesman to his death. Surely such a God would understand, right?

But no, this only made the sea even more tempestuous! This was not solving their problem, it was making it worse. Now, if I were God, I would have shown them mercy. I would have rewarded their effort. They were trying! They didn’t know any better. But this is why I am not God. God’s plan was bigger and better than their plan B. He was about something even more important than saving them and their ship from sinking. But His plan required an act of

obedient faith, an act that otherwise would be nonsensical. You never throw the man of God overboard, . . .unless this God tells you to do so. Instead, do what He tells you to do and trust Him to use the outcome. Get rid of your plan B's with God. I guarantee you that they will not work!

## II. Obedient acts of faith lead to God's salvation. vv. 14-16

I know this is a big point and easily taken out of context, but I make it here nonetheless. We see a big picture point illustrated in the lives of these sailors. Hebrews 11 tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. He will always ask of us to take action based on obedient faith, nonsensical acts of faith, sometimes ridiculous acts of faith. And I know here that more information would be required to be assured that these sailors actually put their hope in the God of Scripture and will be saved for all of eternity. But the information given leads us in that direction. God in a very real way saved those sailors that day from destruction and death. They cried out to Him, they acted by faith, He heard their cries, saw their faith, and saved them. They then gave thanks to Him in tangible ways. All of this is found in these three short verses.

14 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."

Notice here that their individual prayers for deliverance to their individual gods is taken further, a specific prayer to this specific God, calling Him by His personal name, His covenantal name, Yahweh, the LORD. They were all praying to Him. When they heard from Jonah what was required in order for the storm to stop, they cried out to Jonah's God. They prayed for deliverance, salvation if you will, and declared to the LORD that they were only doing this act of throwing Jonah overboard because they believed the LORD was calling

them to do so. It would somehow please this strange God to do such a nonsensical thing for His own purposes.

They themselves had no issue with Jonah, he had done them no harm. They actually had tried to preserve Jonah's life but gave up because it seemed to only make matters worse. So, out of obedient faith, they were going to do what was told of them to do. And they wanted this God to know that and hold them harmless for doing such a drastic thing to someone who had done nothing deserving such action.

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

Can you imagine doing such a thing? Can you imagine the fear and trembling they must have had to knowingly throw to his death the spokesman of the God you were trying to appease, especially since they had only come to know who He even was just a few minutes or hours before? Can you imagine how desperate they must have been to take such action? Can you imagine how stubbornly rebellious Jonah must have been to be a part of such a thing? He knew this would work. He also assuredly knew that this was not God's plan A for him. God did not want his body. God was not trying to destroy His prophet or feed His fish. God wanted the heart of His prophet. He wanted His prophet to obediently act in faith and listen to Him and do what He asked him to do. That is what God wanted. Jonah knew that Yahweh is a merciful God. As we will find out, this was his problem with God! God was TOO merciful. He would rather die than declare the mercies of God to evil sinners. He would rather that innocent sailors die than repent and obey God. Jonah's problem was a heart issue, he did not view lost people as God does. And so, Jonah was determined to be disobedient...to the point of death. Can you imagine that?

And so, they threw Jonah overboard as the last cargo on the ship. Noticed they hurled him, the same word throughout. And sure enough, the sea instantly,

miraculously ceased from its raging. The God who created the land and the sea was no longer angry. His will had been done. Again, imagine what it would have been like to stand on deck, assessing the damage and all that had taken place, knowing that you had lived, but the man who had told you about God had just died after you threw him overboard. I can't imagine such a thing! But as I have suggested, their journey toward God was on its way up. As Jonah was sinking to the bottom of the sea (more on that in the next chapter), they were coming to grips that their search for who was really God had been completed. They found Him, they knew His name, they had prayed to Him and He had delivered them. What now?

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

Their fear of the LORD grew to the highest level, exceedingly. And in this context that is a great thing, a proper thing. In other words, this is not just that they were really, really afraid. While this was certainly true with respect to what the LORD could do to them if He chose to do so, here it certainly includes the type of fear described elsewhere in Scripture, such as Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." You must start with a proper perspective on God. You must be in awe of Him, respecting His power and authority. You must see Him as all everything and yourself as all nothing. You must know that He could if He wanted destroy you and anyone else that He desired. Or He could also show mercy to whomever He wished as well. He is God.

So that led them to worship Him, commit themselves to Him, declare this One true God to be their God. They became followers of Yahweh. Can you see how this is a picture of salvation? Can you see how enlightening this is for us, and for what our perspective should be toward those who do not yet know Him? When we started this chapter, these sailors were just men on a ship paid to do a job. I'm pretty sure they were not chosen to be sailors based on their

fine, upstanding character. I'm sure Jonah did not choose this ship because he knew of their fine character.

And it seems clear to me that Jonah did not change his attitude toward them as he saw the bigger picture emerge. He didn't discern the bigger plan and stop his rebellion and rejoice in what God was doing. No, he went into the sea, into his seeming death in full blown rebellion.

And yet, we also see here that God can and will use even the rebellion of His people to accomplish His will. Jonah's rebellion did not, would not, could not stop the plan of God from going forward. God didn't lose out, Jonah did. He missed the joy of welcoming new brothers into the household of faith. He could have worshipped with them, taught them songs, read or recited the Word of God to them, told them the precious stories of God. But instead, this scene ends with the pagans worshipping on the ship and Jonah sinking to the bottom of the sea, all over the issue of God's right to extend mercy to whomever He wishes.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will check our perspective on lost people.
- 2) We will seek to be a positive part of God's plan, not an obstacle He has to clear out of the way.
- 3) We will NOT attempt to come up with a better plan than His.
- 4) We will fear the LORD and worship Him, following Him in faith filled obedience, even when He asks us to do something that does not make sense.