

### III. *Jonah's Disobedience*

17-Dec-06          Jonah 1:1-16

*Theme:* It is impossible to run away or hide from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

*Key Verses:* Jonah 1:9, 16 <sup>9</sup>So 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>16</sup>Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows.

#### Review

The little book of Obadiah is all about "the doom of Edom." In verses 2-9, Obadiah condemns Edom for the sin of pride. In verses 10-14, Obadiah condemns Edom for the sin of unbrotherliness. He cites a specific example, likely the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, in which the Edomites slid down the slippery slope of sin and committed violence against their brother Israel. Edom at first did not directly participate in the conquest of Judah, but as they stood off to one side, they approved of the calamity, death, and destruction suffered by Jerusalem. Not content to stay on the sidelines, Edom entered into the city of Jerusalem and began looting and pillaging. Finally, they became participants, rounding up escapees and turning them over to the invaders in the day of their brother's distress.

In the final section of the book (vv. 15-21), Obadiah describes the two consequences of the day of the LORD. For Edom and the other nations who have raged against the Lord, it will be a day of judgment and destruction. However, for the people of God, it will be a day of great joy. Obadiah describes three blessings that come to God's people in the day of the LORD – blessings that come upon the entire church of God through Jesus Christ. First, there is holiness – a purging of that which is impure and an increasing sanctification of our lives in conformance to Christ. Second, there is inheritance – the Church is growing and spreading throughout the world. The Church is possessing her possessions in anticipation of our final inheritance – the new heavens and the new earth. Finally, in Jesus Christ there is deliverance or salvation. People of every tribe, tongue, and nation that confess Jesus Christ is Lord are added to the kingdom of God and find salvation. Even people of Edom can find deliverance in Christ if they put their trust in Him.

#### Introduction

This morning we are shifting gears and leaving behind obscure Obadiah. If Obadiah is one of the least known books in the Old Testament, Jonah is probably one of the best known. The story of "Jonah and the Whale" has captured imaginations throughout history. The book of Jonah is the most accessible of the Minor Prophets, because it is primarily written in prose as a story, rather than as a collection of poetic oracles. In fact, the prophetic oracle in the book of Jonah is extraordinarily short: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4b). That's the extent of Jonah's prophetic message.

At least three factors contribute to make the book of Jonah unique amongst the Twelve. First as I've already mentioned, it is written as a historical story in the third person about Jonah rather than as a series of prophecies. The personal histories of other Minor Prophets appear in their prophecies as illustrations (*e.g.*, Hosea 1-3; Amos 7:10-17), but not to the same extent as Jonah. The entire book uses the life of Jonah as an object lesson. It is reasonable to say that the main character in the book is Jonah, although the hero is, of course, God.

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Secondly, the action of the book takes place primarily outside of Israel. We've seen how Obadiah's message was against Edom, although it was written for and delivered directly to the people of God. The book of Jonah was also written primarily for a Jewish audience. However, Jonah's story, although it starts in Israel, takes him eventually to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. This is a significant development. The message of God's judgment (and God's mercy) is going out to the nations.

Third, there is an element of the miraculous in Jonah in his experience with the great fish. Although this portion of the story dominates casual thinking about Jonah, we are not going to spend that much time on it. In this class we will simply acknowledge that the God who is able to create the heavens and the earth in six days out of nothing can direct His creation at His will to accomplish His purposes. Although the episode of the great fish *is* miraculous, the greater miracle in the story is the repentance and conversion of the Ninevites, the enemies of God.

I've chosen to summarize the theme of Jonah simply as, "Repent, Nineveh, Repent!" Not only does this capture the essence of Jonah's message to the Ninevites, but it also contrasts with the theme of a later book – the book of Nahum – which has as its theme the message, "Die, Nineveh, Die!" The book of Nahum is all about judgment upon Nineveh for her sins; the book of Jonah is about the mercy of God that comes upon Nineveh as she repents of her sins. The fact that God has mercy upon Nineveh in Jonah's day is not inconsistent with the judgment preached by Nahum 100 years later. Apparently Nineveh sincerely repented in the days of Jonah, but later generations had backslidden and apostatized, leading ultimately to their judgment and destruction.

The book of Jonah is highly organized. The book consists of two parallel panels in which the layout and content are very similar. Each parallel panel is composed of three corresponding sections. The book concludes with a seventh, unmatched section which is highlighted to emphasize God's lesson for Jonah. This parallel panel layout (adapted from Dorsey) is shown below:

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Panel 1 | A. Jonah Disobeys Commission to Go to Nineveh (1:1-3)  |
|         | B. Jonah and the Pagan Sailors (1:4-16)                |
|         | C. Jonah's Grateful Prayer (1:17-2:10)                 |
| Panel 2 | A'. Jonah Obeys Re-commission to Go to Nineveh (3:1-3) |
|         | B'. Jonah and the Pagan Ninevites (3:4-10)             |
|         | C'. Jonah's Resentful Prayer (4:1-3)                   |
| Climax  | D. The LORD's Lesson for Jonah (4:4-11)                |

In the first sections of each panel (A-A'), God's call to Jonah is given in virtually identical language. Of course, Jonah's response in each section is diametrically opposite from each other. In the second sections (B-B'), Jonah interacts with pagans. In chapter 1, Jonah makes a confession of faith to the pagan sailors, who express great fear of God and worship Him. In chapter 3, Jonah preaches the judgment of God to the pagan Ninevites, who express great fear of God and repent of their sin. In the final paired sections (C-C'), we have the prayers of Jonah. In chapter 2, Jonah prays a wonderful, grateful prayer to God. In chapter 4, we have Jonah's mean-spirited, spiteful prayer. Finally, in the climax of the story (D), we have God giving Jonah an object lesson about the greatness of His mercy and grace.

Exposition

**A. Jonah's Commission (1:1-3)**

1. Jonah ben Amittai (1:1)

<sup>1</sup>Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying ... (Jonah 1:1).

The book of Jonah starts out by introducing us to “Jonah ben Amittai.” What do we know about this man, whose name means “Dove, son of Truth”? The main cross-reference is found in the book of 2 Kings:

<sup>23</sup>In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years. <sup>24</sup>And he did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin. <sup>25</sup>He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher (2 Kings 14:23-25).

In this passage, we learn four things about Jonah ben Amittai. 1) First, we learn that he was a prophet, a servant of God. When Jonah is introduced in the book that bears his name, he was already well known to his audience. He would have needed no further introduction. God had spoken through him in the past, and the words Jonah spoke had come to pass. His authority as a prophet of God had already been firmly established.

2) Secondly, Jonah was from the town of Gath Hepher. This village was located in the territory of Zebulun (*cp.* Jos. 19:13), “approximately twelve miles west of the Sea of Galilee and three miles north-east of Nazareth” (Alexander). Thus, Jonah was a prophet from the northern kingdom of Israel.

3) Third, Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 BC). Jeroboam II was the greatest king of the northern kingdom of Israel. Although he “did evil in the sight of the LORD” like all the other kings of Israel, especially with respect to religious sin, God was gracious to Jeroboam and gave him a long, stable, and prosperous reign. The reign of Jeroboam was a mini “golden age” for the northern kingdom. He was able to expand his national borders (according to the word of the LORD through Jonah) and bring peace and stability to Israel. This *pax Jeroboam* was short-lived, however. Within 30 years of his death, the nation of Israel was destroyed and taken away into captivity by the Assyrians.

4) Finally, 2 Kings tells us that Jonah has already given a message of prosperity to a wicked king. Although Jeroboam did not deserve God’s favor, God delivered that message to Jeroboam through Jonah. That should have directed the king of Israel to repent of his sin and thank God for His mercy. But no such godly response was to come from the king of Israel. Now Jonah is being called to give a message of judgment to another wicked king. By way of contrast, consider how the king of Nineveh would later respond to Jonah’s message of God’s coming judgment (3:7-9).

We don’t know when the book of Jonah was written, or even who the author was. However, from context, it seems clear that the prophet Jonah ben Amittai was the same one spoken of in 2 Kings 14. Thus, we can date the content of the story to the period of approximately 780-750 BC, although the exact date of the book’s composition is unknown.

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### 2. God's Command (1:2)

<sup>2</sup>“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me” (Jonah 1:2).

God's commission for Jonah is given in verse 2. Like the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, Jonah was to “go” and to “preach” the word of God to the nations (*cp.* Mt. 28:19-20), or in this case, a specific nation – the city of Nineveh. There are three main features of Nineveh to be highlighted here.

1) First, Nineveh was a *great city*. Nineveh was located on the east bank of the Tigris River opposite modern day Mosul in northern Iraq. It was a large and prosperous place, filled with palaces and wealth. Although it was not the capital city of Assyria in Jonah's day, Sennacherib (705-681 BC) would later make it the chief royal city of the Assyrian Empire (*cp.* 2 Ki. 19:36).

2) Secondly, Nineveh was a *foreign city*. God had previously given Jonah an easy message: preach prosperity to Jeroboam of Israel. Now he was being given a much tougher message: preach judgment against a great, foreign city a long way from home. It was difficult enough for the prophets of God to preach against the sins of their own people, but to travel 600 miles to Nineveh and preach a message of judgment against pagan Gentiles was virtually unheard of. Before we judge Jonah's reaction to his call, we need to appreciate the enormity of the task that God has called Jonah to bear.

3) Finally, Nineveh was a *wicked city*. Just as God saw the great wickedness of the earth in Noah's day (Gen. 6:5), the stench of Nineveh's wickedness had risen up to heaven and was offensive to the holy God. Nineveh is presented to us like another Sodom (*cp.* Gen. 18:20-21), a city of wickedness that must be destroyed.

On the surface, the book of Jonah is about the prophet and his message to the city of Nineveh. However, I believe we can legitimately go beyond that level to a deeper level of meaning. In a sense, we can consider Nineveh as symbolic of “the essence of human self-exaltation and anti-God power” (Allen). Thus, Nineveh can represent, in addition to the historical city of that name, the people or nations of the world in any age that rebel and rage against God. Likewise, the personage of Jonah takes on a greater significance. He is not merely a historical man called by God to a difficult task. Rather, he represents the entire nation of Israel – or if you will, the Church – called by God to preach the gospel to every nation in obedience to the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20). Taken in this light, we can see that the story of Jonah has abiding significance for us today, since the people of Nineveh live all around us.

### 3. Jonah Disobeys (1:3)

After hearing God's commission, we naturally expect to read the words: “So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.” Eventually we will get to those words (3:3b), but first we read this shocking statement (chiasm per Alexander):

<sup>3</sup>But Jonah arose 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 from the presence of the LORD (Jonah 1:3).

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Jonah received a clear call from the LORD, and he turned and ran in the opposite direction! Nineveh was 600 miles northeast over land. Instead, Jonah chose to flee 60 miles to the Phoenician-controlled port of Joppa (modern Jaffa) to board a ship heading directly west for Tarshish. Although no one now knows exactly where Tarshish was located, most commentators believe that it was Tartessos, a Phoenician colony located at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River in southern Spain. Tarshish is one of the names mentioned in the Table of Nations (Gen. 10:5). Tarshish (meaning “smelter”) is mentioned several other times in Scripture (*e.g.*, Ps. 72:10; Jer. 10:9; Ez. 27:12) as a faraway place and the source of precious metals. Isaiah describes it as one of “the coastlands afar off who have not heard My fame nor seen My glory” (Is. 66:19). If you were foolish enough to try and run away from God, at least Tarshish seems like the right place to go – far, far away.

God had called Jonah to rise up and go to Nineveh. Instead, Jonah rose up and went toward Tarshish. An interesting thing happens as Jonah goes to Tarshish. Instead of “rising up,” Jonah is continually “going down.” Jonah “went down” to Joppa and then he “went down” into the boat (1:3). Soon we’ll see that Jonah “had gone down into the lowest part of the ship” (1:5). But Jonah will sink even lower. Eventually he will be thrown overboard and sink to the bottom of the sea. It is there, in the belly of the fish, that Jonah will acknowledge how far he has fallen: “I went down to the moorings of the mountains” (2:6); in other words, he has sunk down to the foundations of the ocean. Jonah has physically gone down as far as he can go. Of course, Jonah’s physical descent is a picture of his spiritual decline.

His spiritual decline starts when he decides to flee “from the presence of the LORD.” Jonah was orthodox enough to recognize that he could never truly escape from an omnipotent, omnipresent God. His confession in verse 9 demonstrates that. No doubt he knew the inspired words of David:

<sup>7</sup>Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? <sup>8</sup>If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. <sup>9</sup>If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, <sup>10</sup>even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me (Psalm 137:7-10).

Soon Jonah will become a living example that dwelling “in the uttermost parts of the sea” cannot separate him from the presence of God. So why did Jonah run if he knew he couldn’t escape? Keddie explains:

When Cain, for example, “went out from the Lord’s presence” (Gen. 4:16), what is clearly signified is that Cain, as a rebel and a fugitive, was no longer in the service or the favor of his God. On the other hand, to “stand before the Lord” is always, in Scripture, equivalent to serving him (1 Kg. 17:1; 18:15). The person who chooses to flee from the presence of God, therefore, is refusing to serve God in the task he knows that the Lord has given him to do. The matter is primarily spiritual and only secondarily geographical.

Jonah’s flight was nothing less than rebellion against God. He did not want the commission that God had given him. Perhaps he was afraid of the difficulties of the mission or the danger that it posed. But those fears were only secondary concerns; they weren’t the true source of his disobedience. The real reason Jonah disobeyed was because he knew all too well the nature and character of God. In chapter 4, after Nineveh has repented and God has pardoned them of their sins, Jonah complains that this very situation – the great mercy and grace of God poured out upon Nineveh – was the reason he had tried to flee to Tarshish in the first place! (4:2).

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Although he was called to preach a message of judgment, Jonah knew the LORD well enough to know that He would show mercy to penitent sinners. And that was a scenario that Jonah could not stomach. Jonah was okay with God showing mercy to sinful King Jeroboam of Israel, but he could not accept God showing the same grace to sinful Gentiles. It didn't fit Jonah's world-and-life view.

Jonah is meant to be an example for us—an example that we are not to copy. Instead of fleeing from the presence of the LORD, we are to run to Christ. Jonah had a clear understanding of what the will of God was for his life, and he chose to rebel against it. On the surface, it may have seemed like providence was approving of his decision to run the other way. After all, he quickly found a ship and was on his way. But as Mathew Henry pointed out (per Keddie), “The ready way is not always the right way.” Just because the door is open doesn't mean we should walk through it, especially if it is a decision that is clearly in contravention of God's revealed will in the Bible. As we seek to understand the will of God for our lives, let us not rely so much on “open doors” as on the Word of God for principles of right conduct and holy living.

### B. Jonah's Flight (1:4-16)

The second section of Jonah describes his aborted flight from the presence of God. This section is tightly organized into an extended chiasm noted by many commentators (*e.g.*, Alexander, Allen, Nixon). Variations on the chiasmic structure can give 10, 11, 13, or even 15 different lines, although in every case, the center of the structure is the confession of Jonah in verse 9. For example, here is a 13 line chiasm of Jonah 1:4-16 (Dorsey):

- a **Yahweh hurls a great wind upon the sea** (1:4)
  - b **Sailors cry out** (in vain) to their gods (1:5a)
  - c **Sailors' frantic and futile efforts** to save ship by throwing cargo overboard (1:5b-c)
  - d **Jonah does nothing to save the ship:** he remains down in the hold, uninvolved; captain pleads with him to help save the ship (1:6)
  - e **Sailors' efforts to ascertain what to do:** inquiry by lots—Jonah is guilty (1:7)
  - f **Sailors demand an explanation** from Jonah: tell us (1:8)
  - g CLIMAX: Jonah's testimony (1:9)
  - f' **Sailors demand an explanation** from Jonah because of what he had told (1:10)
  - e' **Sailors' efforts to ascertain what they must do:** inquiry of Jonah—the guilty party (1:11)
  - d' **Jonah finally acts to save the ship:** he proposes that he be thrown overboard (1:12)
  - c' **Sailors' frantic and futile efforts** to save ship by rowing harder (1:13)
  - b' **Sailors cry out to Yahweh** (1:14)
  - a' **Sailors hurl Jonah into the sea** and the sea becomes still (1:15)
- Conclusion:** sailors greatly feared Yahweh and made sacrifices and vows to him (1:16)

Several key terms are repeated in this section: the sea, “hurl” or “throw,” and “fear.” These terms serve to unite the section and emphasize its main points.

#### 1. God's Storm (1:4-6)

Verse 3 starts out “But Jonah.” However, Jonah does not have the last word in this power struggle with God, for we read at the start of verse 4, “But God.” The LORD is not content to allow His prophet to run away from Him. Instead He “sent out a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up” (1:4). The Hebrew text literally says that God “hurls” or “throws” the storm at Jonah and his ship. This is the same word used of the sailors when they throw all the cargo overboard to lighten the ship (1:5). It is also used of the sailors when they pick Jonah up and hurl him into the sea (1:15).

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God must have thrown quite a storm, because it creates immediate and intense panic in the crew of the ship. This crew of no doubt veteran sailors had never before experienced a storm of such intensity, ferocity, and suddenness. This was no ordinary storm and they knew it. They attempted everything they could to weather the storm. They lightened the ship by throwing the cargo overboard. They began praying to their various gods, hoping that one of them would listen and come to their aid.

Where was Jonah in all this? He was down in the deepest part of the ship, fast asleep. Do you see the irony intended by the author at this point? Jonah's physical sleep is paralleled by his spiritual unconsciousness. The pagan sailors, crying out in vain to their false gods, are nonetheless more spiritually aware than the prophet of the LORD, who is oblivious to his circumstances. The sailors know that they need supernatural help; their problem lies in their ignorance of the true God. Meanwhile, Jonah is painfully unaware of the physical (and spiritual) danger his disobedience has created.

Leaving no stone unturned in his valiant efforts to save his ship and crew, the captain eventually finds his wayward passenger and shakes him into the conscious world. He cries out to Jonah, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish" (1:6). Here is more irony. God had told Jonah to "arise," go to pagan Nineveh, and cry out against their wickedness. Now this pagan sea captain is telling Jonah to "arise" and call upon the God he is attempting to flee. Once again, there is more truth and spiritual awareness in the mouth of the Gentile captain than there is in the conduct of the prophet of the LORD.

### 2. *Sailors' Lots (1:7-8)*

In an attempt to identify the source of this supernatural storm, the sailors decide to cast lots. The casting of lots was an Old Testament practice used to discern the will of God:

<sup>33</sup>The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD (Proverbs 16:33).

Lots were often used to make selections for service (*cp.* Jdg. 20:9; 1 Sam. 10:19-21; 1 Chr. 24:5, 21; 25:8; 26:13-16), inheritance (*cp.* Num. 33:54; Jos. 18:6-10; Neh. 11:1) or judgment (*cp.* Lev. 16:8-10; Jos. 7:13-22). Casting of lots was never to be used in an attempt to foretell the future. Apart from the special selection of a replacement for Judas in Acts 1:26 that according to Peter fulfilled Old Testament prophecy (Ps. 69:25; 109:8), the use of lots disappears in the New Testament. Instead, as Keddie points out, "in the post-Pentecost church offices were filled by popular choice, not lots (Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3). There is no warrant for using lots today as acts of piety for the purpose of discovering the will of God."

So the sailors play "spin the bottle" and they soon discover that – surprise! – Jonah is the source of their problems. They immediately begin to bombard him with questions. "Who are you? What have you done? Where are you from? What is your country? What is your occupation?" The sailors are not conducting a job interview. Mackay says this is not an "immigration questionnaire." Rather, these questions have religious significance. The sailors have been trying to find out which of the gods has been offended and is causing the storm. They want to know where Jonah is from so they can understand which god to appease.

### 3. *Jonah's Confession (1:9)*

It is at this point in the narrative that we have the first words of Jonah. So far his feet have done the talking, but now he is forced to speak. His statement in verse 9 is the hinge point of this

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entire section. Given his conduct up to this point in the story, we might be surprised at the strong credal statement that Jonah utters: “I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (1:9).

Jonah no longer hides who he is or what he is doing. He confesses that he is a Hebrew, that is, an Israelite. He follows that up with a description of his God. First, He is “the LORD.” Jonah uses the covenant name of God – Yahweh, or the LORD. This is the name by which He revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:14-15). This is the name of God which speaks of His covenant faithfulness, His willingness and ability to keep His promises and save His people. This is the personal name of God.

Jonah continues to describe Him as “the God of heaven.” Unlike the gods of the pagan sailors, gods made of wood or stone by their own hands, Jonah worships a God who dwells in heaven. He is high and mighty, a holy God lifted far above this mortal sphere. And yet, He controls this world, for He is also the maker of “the sea and the dry land” (*cp.* Ps. 95:5). This phrase is a *merism* – a bookend of two opposites that implies everything in between. In other words, Jonah is declaring that God is the creator of all things, including the present storm (*cp.* Ps. 135:6-7).

This is a good confession. This is an orthodox confession. Furthermore, it is a personal confession. Note that Jonah says that he “fears” the LORD. Here is the second use of “fear” in this passage. The sailors were afraid of the storm in verse 5; now Jonah fears the Lord in verse 9. Of course, when Jonah says he “fears the LORD,” what he is saying is that he “worships the LORD.” Fear in the Bible is commonly used to signify the reverent worship of God (*cp.* Pr. 1:7).

### 4. Sailors’ Fear (1:10-12)

Jonah’s “fear of the LORD” leads to additional “fear” from the sailors. Literally, “the men feared a great fear.” Why are they afraid now? They’ve at last found out the source of their problem. There are at least two sources of their fear. The first is their knowledge of who the LORD Yahweh was. These sailors may have been pagans, but they were men of the world. They got around. They heard stories while they were in port and out at sea. They had to have heard about the great God of the Hebrews, the God who destroyed Egypt, parted the Red Sea, defeated the Canaanites, and had performed many other wonders. This was no weak god who had no power to pursue a wayward prophet across the sea. This was Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews!

The second source of their fear was their current situation. The storm was no accident. It was directed at Jonah, and it was getting stronger; “the sea was growing more tempestuous” (1:11). Although the text doesn’t tell us directly, we know from the second half of verse 10 that Jonah proceeded to tell them the whole story of his flight from God’s presence. The sailors could put two and two together and make four. They recognized they had a serious problem on their hands. Yahweh—the maker of heaven and earth, the sea and the dry land—was angry at His prophet and He had the power to do something about it. The sailors were afraid that they were about to become collateral damage.

As the sailors continue to question the prophet, Jonah quietly gives them the solution to their situation: “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me” (1:12). Jonah confesses his guilt. He is responsible for the storm. If the sailors get rid of the LORD’s prophet, they will get rid of the LORD’s storm.

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How are we to understand Jonah's suggestion? Is this some heroic self-sacrifice to save the sailors, or is it a melancholy attempt at suicide? Does Jonah have a death wish? Has Jonah fallen so low that he will do anything to escape God, up to and including being cast into the deep? Would Jonah rather die than become obedient? Or has Jonah at last woken up from his stupor and realized that he is not the center of the universe and that his actions have consequences, not only for himself but for others around him?

There is no doubt that Jonah deserved to die. He was disobedient and guilty. It is less clear what his motivation was for wanting to be cast overboard. Perhaps Jonah received a prophetic word from God that indicated he should be hurled into the sea. Perhaps Jonah recognized that despite his confession, sin has consequences, and he was at last prepared to face them, even if it meant physical death. Some commentators see elements of a sacrifice in this gesture – as if Jonah's apparent death in the sea could be considered as an act of substitution on behalf of the sailors. Estelle mentions that "Calvin goes so far as to call it expiation," although I would be hesitant to go that far.

### 5. *God's Calm (1:13-16)*

Apparently the sailors also had reservations about Jonah's solution, because they weren't willing to implement it, at least at first. Instead, they vainly try to row for shore. Boice points out the irony of the situation. Although Jonah was willing for the entire pagan city of Nineveh to perish, these pagan sailors (akin to the Ninevites) are unwilling to let even one man perish.

Once it becomes apparent that rowing is a futile effort, the sailors turn their efforts to prayer. In verse 5, their prayers were directed towards their various pagan gods. In verse 14, they "cried out to the LORD." Jonah has begun to have an effect on these men. They now know who the true and living God is, the God to whom they must pray.

What is the substance of their prayer? "We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You" (1:14). Essentially, they are praying for permission to enact the judgment that Jonah has proposed. However, they don't want to be held guilty for throwing a man overboard to his death. Jonah is not innocent in the sense that he is guiltless, for he is certainly guilty before God. However, the sailors recognize that they don't have a legal right to judge Jonah, and so they don't want to bear blood guilt for casting the prophet to his death.

The prayer ends with a wonderful statement of God's sovereignty: "for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You." Estelle points out that the idea of God doing whatever He pleases is found three other times in the Old Testament: Isaiah 46:10; Psalm 115:3; and Psalm 135:6. In each case, there are two ideas which overlap: the futility of idol worship and the extent of God's rule over creation. Thus, the prayer of the sailors is in firm agreement with Scripture and seems to indicate that they also now realize the futility of idol worship. If Yahweh, the God of heaven and the creator of the sea and the dry land can do whatever He pleases, then it makes no sense to worship man-made idols.

<sup>15</sup>So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

<sup>16</sup>Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows (Jonah 1:15-16).

Jonah was right. When the sailors threw Jonah overboard, the storm immediately and miraculously stopped. God's tempest against Jonah was immediately replaced by God's calm

## Minor Prophets: Obadiah, Jonah, Malachi

for the sailors. For the moment the fate of Jonah is left undisclosed. He “sinks” into the background, while we finish the story of the sailors who had the “misfortune” of picking up in Joppa a Hebrew passenger named Jonah ben Amittai bound for Tarshish.

Verse 16 is the last occurrence of the word “fear” in the passage. The sailors had feared the storm and greatly feared after hearing Jonah’s confession. But now their fright has turned to reverence. They no longer fear the storm; instead they fear the LORD of the storm. Like Jonah who feared God and worshipped him, these pagan sailors now fear and worship the LORD God of Israel.

Their worshipped is summarized as offering a sacrifice and taking vows. Since it is unlikely they had the capability to offer a burnt sacrifice on board a wooden ship without any cargo, these acts of worship had to wait until they got back to port. Perhaps they returned to Joppa and then made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the place of sacrifice. The text doesn’t say. But it does imply that this was not foxhole religion. They didn’t make promises to God in the middle of the storm, asking Him to get them out of the storm. Instead, this worship and these vows were made after the storm had departed.

Some commentators believe that the actions of the sailors fall short of conversion. I’m not so sure. Although Jonah was not around to witness it, it seems to me that his confession in verse 9 has borne fruit. The statement of verse 16 is consistent with true conversion and faith on the part of the sailors. This is the latest irony in Jonah chapter 1. The prophet who refused to carry God’s word of judgment against the pagan, Gentile city of Nineveh, lest they perchance repent and be spared, is the unwitting instrument of conversion to a band of pagan, Gentile sailors!

### Conclusion

On one level, the first chapter of Jonah is all about Jonah’s disobedience. It shows the folly of trying to run away from God and the consequences of sin. Jonah knows that God is the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth (*cp.* Ps. 121:2; 124:8). Yet that did not stop him from trying to hide from the presence of God. Jonah’s situation clearly demonstrates how sin separates us from God. Like Adam, the first man who tried to hide from the presence of God (Gen. 3:8), Jonah’s sin of rebellion had consequences. In the case of Adam, death and sin entered the world. For Jonah, death awaited him in the deeps of the sea.

But more fundamentally, the first chapter of Jonah is all about the nature and character of God. The chapter starts out with a commission of judgment against Nineveh for wickedness, highlighting God’s *justice* and *holiness*. As Jonah begins his flight, the emphasis turns towards God’s pursuing love, a *righteous love* that will not permit our anti-hero to escape the *sovereignty* and *dominion* of the Creator and Covenant God. God’s *power* over the wind and the waves is presented as a clear contrast to the futility and impotence of man-made idols. While the appearance and disappearance of the mighty tempest could be consider the first miracle in this story, the first chapter ends with an even greater miracle: the conversion of the pagan sailors. God’s *grace* and *mercy* are in view here, as this bedraggled crew of Gentiles cry out to the LORD and worship him through sacrifice and vows. What a great God we serve! In His *providence*, He uses even the disobedience of Jonah the prophet to bring more glory to His name.

Next week: Lesson 4 – Jonah’s Prayer – Jonah 1:17-2:10

Close in Prayer.