

Jonah

Bible Study – Scene 2

Jonah 1:4-16

Dr. Reed Lessing in his Concordia Commentary (CC) of Jonah divides his remarks on Jonah into seven scenes. This is the second section.

In contrast to Jonah, the sailors—these “paid extras” (hired in 1:3)—demonstrate remarkable self-restraint, concern for the safety and welfare of Jonah, and reverence toward Jonah’s God (cf. 1:6, 14) culminating in faith and worship of Yahweh (1:16). On the other hand, Jonah seems to be little concerned with the fate of those around him, his own responsibility as a prophet of Yahweh, or even his own well-being. Jonah sinks (!) in our estimation while the sailors rise, both figuratively and literally! (CC)

The second scene (1:4-16) suggests a pattern in the usage of terms for God. “Yahweh” is the covenant name of God, revealed to his redeemed people. It is “Yahweh” who calls his prophet (1:1–3). Elohim (translated “God,”) is used for the gods of the non-Israelite sailors (1:5) and is the term used by their captain for Jonah’s “God.” (CC)

There are Jonah-like people in the NT who exhibit a kind of spiritual myopia. They have trouble seeing that the grace of God the Father in his Son, Jesus, is for all peoples. Admission into God’s kingdom is free for anyone by grace alone, regardless of one’s past sins or ethnicity. God’s welcome goes out to all, “both the bad and the good” (Mt 22:10). One example of the Jonah mind set is a leader of the synagogue who wants to keep the letter of the Law instead of rejoicing in a woman made whole by Jesus’ word and touch (Lk 13:10–17). (CC)

1. As Jonah flees, Yahweh goes with him by means of this storm (v. 4). The prophet cannot get rid of Yahweh! He cannot hide, travel, sleep, or put himself in such a situation that Yahweh will ever give up on him. (CC) How is that comforting for us to know?
2. Violent storms on the Mediterranean Sea are not uncommon, but this was a special storm. “The Lord sent [literally, hurled] a great wind on the sea.” It came from out of the clear blue sky with no forewarning. (PBC) Storms of different kinds come into our lives (sickness, financial issues as well as physical catastrophes). Read Luke 8:22-25. What does that text tell us about God and the storms in our lives?
3. These experienced sailors realized they needed supernatural help to survive this unusual storm, showing more religious fervor than Jonah did. Luther states: “Reason is unable to identify God properly; it cannot ascribe the Godhead to the One who is entitled to it exclusively. It knows that there is a God, but it does not know who or which is the true God.... Reason never finds the true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil. So there is a vast difference between knowing that there is a God and knowing who or what God is. Nature knows the former—it is inscribed in everybody’s heart; the latter is taught only by the Holy Spirit.” (TLSB)

By going down to the bottom of the ship and by falling into a deep sleep (v. 5), he is completely disconnected. He has cut himself off from Yahweh and also from the needy people in the boat and in Nineveh. (CC)

Jonah, who knew the real God, was fast asleep. We, as Christians, know how the triune God can bring the help that is needed. How can we at troubling times not sleep but provide the peace of God to those around us?

4. According to Ezek. 27:12–25, a ship on the Mediterranean might carry such cargo as precious metals, horses and mules, ivory, and various other products. The sailors' action may be designed to lighten the ship and so help it ride out the storm. The cargo may also be intended as a sacrifice to appease the angry sea or another offended god. But their efforts are completely futile in accomplishing either purpose. (CC) What are some futile ways that people today try to bring about solutions to problems?
5. What irony! A heathen ship's captain must call upon a prophet of God to wake up and pray when Jonah should have been the first one to be alert to prayer. He was acting more like a heathen than the captain and his sailors! (PBC) Sometimes we, too, may need to have unbelieving people remind us of what God would have us do. If you can think of any in your life, ask for God's merciful forgiveness.
6. It is safe to assume that the mariners would not have set sail on such a voyage had there been a hint of bad weather. They assume the unexpected storm has a supernatural cause and investigate who must have offended the divine. Someone's sin has to be responsible for this calamity! To the ancient mind, storms were not the products of impersonal meteorological forces but were directed to specific ends by specific wills. If the person at fault is found and dealt with, the danger may pass. (CC)

The casting of lots (v. 7) was a custom widely practiced in the ancient Near East. The precise method is unclear, though it appears that, for the most part, sticks or marked pebbles were drawn from a receptacle into which they had been "cast." (CSB)

The practice continued into the NT. The Roman soldiers cast lots for the clothing of the crucified Christ in fulfillment of Scripture (Jn 19:23–24, citing Ps 22:18. The Eleven prayed and cast lots to select an apostle to succeed Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:26). (CC)

The crew wanted to know whom to blame for such a tempestuous storm. (TLSB)

Fixing blame when things go wrong is a common human response. What might be a more God pleasing way to proceed? Read also John 9:1-3.

7. Once the lot falls to him, Jonah is immediately placed on trial, but this is no ordinary courtroom interrogation. The questions are not formulated by a ruminating attorney absorbed in the finer details of the case, but by terrified sailors clinging to their lives in the midst of a howling gale! A salvo of short questions is fired at Jonah. Their brevity is in keeping with the dire circumstances on the boat. (CC)

At long last, Jonah breaks his silence and finally speaks. In any Hebrew narrative, the point at which the main character first speaks is worthy of special attention. In most instances the initial words are a key revelation of the person's character. That Jonah answers the sailors, but incompletely, offers a key insight into who he is. Jonah confesses Yahweh, but he does not confess his sin. He declares that he is a worshiper of Yahweh, but he is on the lam from Yahweh—at the same time! Could hypocrisy be stated any more clearly? Jonah is fleeing from Yahweh, whom he confesses as omnipotent, on the very sea that he confesses that Yahweh has made. The creed is true

doctrine, but in Jonah's mouth, we have to wonder whether it is confessed in true faith. (CC)

Throughout the book Jonah never completely confesses his evil. It festers and grows until it becomes a "great evil" (4:1) and threatens to overcome him. Jonah spurns the counsel of King David in Ps 4:4. (CC)

Read 1 John 1:8-10. What can be learned from Jonah's behavior and 1 John 1:8-10?

8. "What is this you have done?" is the sixth question addressed to Jonah since his flight. The sailors will ask one more question in 1:11: "What shall we do to you?" Each of these questions in 1:8–11 concerns Jonah's identity and responsibility. Their building intensity parallels the heightening intensity of the storm. Jonah's failure to conform his life to his professed faith in Yahweh caused this external threat, both for himself and for those around him. As the English poet John Donne put it, "No man is an island, entire of itself." (CC)

The sailors react in a way more indicative of faith than does the Israelite Jonah. He is reacting in a manner we would expect from an unbeliever. The sailors cannot imagine anyone treating his deity in such a fashion. They have a fear and respect for the divine that Jonah does not. This is an ongoing theme in the narrative: the Gentile outsiders display greater reverence and understanding than the Israelite insider, Jonah, who remains mostly clueless. (CC)

Besides being a bad witness, how can this Jonah like behavior hurt us and/or others?

9. With the sailors reeling from the howling storm, their sense of urgency escalates. They press Jonah for a solution, realizing that he alone knows how to respond to his own God in such a catastrophic situation (v. 11). (CC) How does Jonah's answer show that his conscience has been awakened?
10. *They did their best to row* (v. 13). The Hebrew uses the picturesque word meaning "to dig" (with oars) to indicate strenuous effort. The ship could be driven by sails, oars, or both. (CSB) How does the behavior of the sailors differ markedly from Jonah's attitude?
11. How did Jonah's simple confession of faith (v 9) lead these pagan sailors to realize that the Lord had sent the storm.
12. What can you learn from these verses?

Some Answers to the above Questions:

1. That means that God never gives up on us or our loved ones. The following passages say it well:

Deuteronomy 31:6: Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." (This spoken to Joshua and Israel when Moses is about to die)

Matthew 28:20: And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. (Jesus said this to His disciples when He was about to ascend into heaven.)

2. Jesus is stronger than any kind of storm that may enter into our lives. He is God over the whole universe.

3. By using the Word and Sacraments regularly we will be more ready to serve others in their time of need. Being in the Word also gives provides us with words of comfort when they are needed by others.

4. A few ways people attempt to find solutions to life's problems may be but are not limited to: Work harder, try harder to keep God's commands, rely on superstitions...

5. Also know that God can and will empower you to do better in the future.

6. The Lord often has a higher good that is to be provided when problems come. Rather than spend time determining quilt it would be better for us to try to determine what the Lord wants us to learn from the situation.

7. One lesson might be that if we don't confess our sins we get no relief.

8. Deliberate God defining behavior can bring all kinds (emotional, physical, spiritual) of trouble into our lives. In all likely-hood it will also impact our family and friends.

9. Jonah knows that the storm is his fault.

10. These positive actions of the mariners stand in stark contrast with the behavior of Jonah. They have been thrown into a life-threatening storm through no fault of their own. They have lost their cargo. Yet they still seek to save the life of the man responsible for all the chaos. The sailors are models of true forgiveness. Their actions demonstrate the Pauline diction in Eph 4:32: "Be kind unto one another, compassionate, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ forgave you." (CC)

11. In contrast to their previous frantic prayer to their false gods, the sailors now prayer to the Lord with a remarkable degree of quiet confidence and faith. (PBC)