

Text: Jonah 1:11-17

Title: Jonah and the Fish

Truth: God continues to demonstrate His sovereignty over all things.

Date/Location: Sunday June 26, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

The sailors were already afraid because of the great storm that was upon them (1:5). To their credit, they became even more afraid after Jonah told them about his connection to the LORD who created the sea and land. They understood that Jonah was the cause of the danger to their lives, and their loss of goods that they just threw overboard.

Remember we ended last time by noting that the sailors asked Jonah why he ran from God? He was not a murderer or some other reprobate. He was a man who knew what His God had told him to do but did not do it. These men were incredulous because in their own devotion to their “gods” they understood that there were certain things you had to do, and certain ways you had to do it, and if you violated those, you would get in trouble with that god. Obviously this thinking is awash in pagan philosophy, but there was enough of a conscience and the law of God still in their inner being, placed there by God in the creation of humanity, that they knew intuitively Jonah was doing something very dumb by disobeying the God he professed to fear.

I. Note about the Theology of Retribution

- A. The sailors figured that someone had to be at fault for offending their “god.” How did they know this? Many religions and even modern philosophies hold to an idea like luck, fate, or karma. They espouse the idea that you get what you deserve. For example, you may experience “bad karma” or a bad reincarnation if you do something bad. Or, if you do something good, you may expect a reward to come to you.
- B. That is a natural feature of human thinking. And it is true to a certain extent. “You reap what you sow” is a Biblical principle (Galatians 6:7-8). And indeed, in the end, every person will be

evaluated at a judgment—believers for more or less rewards for faithful service, and unbelievers for eternal judgment because their works were evil.

- C. There are problems with it, however. First, even if something is going to happen for good or bad done, the timing is not necessarily immediate. This makes connecting the first event to the second fraught with uncertainty. Second, there are exceptions, at least in this life, for example when the wicked seem to prosper (Psalm 73:3) and the righteous suffer (Ecclesiastes 8:14, 9:2; Phil. 1:29). Third, sometimes dreadful things happen with no reason of sin in the person suffering—see the entire book of Job. Fourth, sometimes bad things happen to a person to highlight God's grace and mercy, and it is not a "sowing and reaping" type of thing at all—see John 9:1-3. And fifth, an extension of the prior point is that God does not necessarily punish *you* for *your* sin—if you believe in Jesus Christ, God will forgive your sins. In that case, the righteous (Jesus) suffers in place of the unrighteous.

Let me express that another way. If you are speaking with someone who holds to a "karma" type of philosophy, you could say something like this: The reason I do not believe in karma is because of the good news about Jesus Christ. God does not give His children the exact consequences that they deserve because if they believe in Jesus Christ, He takes away the penalty for their wrongdoing. The death of Jesus Christ paid for your wrongdoing—if you will accept it. In His resurrection He will raise His people from the grave as well, forever to enjoy the blessing of God, which is far better than what we deserve.

- D. The upshot of all this is that we cannot pinpoint every adverse event on the sin of a particular person, or even their "unlucky" presence. Perhaps the bad event was "random" from the human vantage point. Maybe there are other reasons we do not know about. Maybe God is doing something that we do not yet see or understand.
- E. Jonah put the matter to rest by saying in verse 12, "I know that this...is because of me." Jonah is a prophet. He had a special

connection to God and could say that with a certainty which we cannot muster because God does not reveal it to us.

II. What to Do? V. 11

- A. The mariners asked Jonah what they could do to appease his God. The situation was dire and worsening. Could Jonah pray? The text does not say so. Could Jonah repent and ask God to save him and his fellow boat riders if they, say, turned around?
- B. What can be done when someone has sinned? Sometimes in this life, there are no ways to repair the bad that was done. Collateral damage occurs. A crime leaves a victim dead or permanently injured and mentally scarred. Bystanders experience similar damage. War destroys things and kills people and injures them and traumatizes them. Terrorism leaves fear in its wake. There are some things that simply cannot be undone or fixed. This is why they say that sin will take you farther than you wanted to go and cost you more than you wanted to pay. Although it seems attractive to our sinful natures to give in to our temptations, it is not at all worth it—neither in this life nor in the eternal perspective.

Note carefully that I am talking above about temporal consequences of sin. The *guilt* of sin *can* be gotten rid of if you take it to Christ. He takes it upon Himself. But short of that, the guilt of sin cannot be removed. When guilt is removed, sometimes some or all of the temporal consequences of sin are fixed, but other times temporal consequences remain in place.

- C. Something *could* be done in Jonah's case, but the harm to the sailors was permanent. They lost cargo and a few years off their lives. They would have quite a story to tell their children and grandchildren. But these sorts of things are far better to avoid in the first place.

III. Solution: Throw the Offender Overboard, v. 12-16

- A. This is not a normative verse. What I mean is this: do not take this as a teaching that you should apply to yourself! Again, because Jonah was a prophet, he knew what God wanted him to do. He

might not have known the vehicle for his deliverance, but he knew—from God—how to answer the men’s question “what shall we do to you?”

- B. Jonah now took responsibility. Although he was going to suggest that the men throw him overboard, he was really casting himself upon God. He deserved whatever outcome God chose for him, but he had to do something to save the sailors’ lives. And he trusted that God indeed would spare them, for they were not at fault for the iniquity he had committed.
- C. The sailors did not have Jonah’s confidence and from their perspective, throwing Jonah over the side was the same as killing him. So first, verse 13, they tried to get back to land, but they found they were unable to do so because the more they tried, the more the wind blew against them. Evidently, they were close enough to land to make the attempt. The situation reminds us that sometimes God puts people into situations where they *must* obey the word of the prophet. So, they prayed God would not punish them for murdering a man. They did not want to die for doing something wrong—like Jonah was seemingly about to experience—nor to carry God’s charge of guilt against them their whole lives. It seemed to them that this drastic course of action was in accord with what God wanted (“as it pleased You”).
- D. When they threw Jonah over, the sea immediately became calm. They learned that God is indeed the Lord of the sea. There was no doubt in their minds of this fact. If you are a modern skeptic, you might doubt, but had you experienced this, you might feel less skeptical!

They were not confused in thinking that the sea itself was a god; no, it was an “object” that was under the control of an omnipotent power. They, like everyone else in the world, see general revelation and therefore intuitively know of God’s eternal power and divine nature.

- E. Therefore, they feared God. The sailors likely did not become full converts to Judaism. They may have added the God of the Hebrews to their polytheistic way of thinking. They did offer sacrifices and vows to God. It might have been after they returned

to land when they did the sacrifices, but that minor issue of timing does not change the point. Jonah's errant cruise ride turned into a witness for God.

Today, we do not need to see a miracle like this to fear God. We know better already because we have read and believe the miraculous account of Jesus's life and death and resurrection. We have experienced, I trust, the miracle of new life imparted to us when we are saved.

IV. Jonah and the Fish, v. 17

- A. There are several events that are amazing in this account. The **first** is the timing and size of the storm on the Mediterranean Sea. It perfectly coincided with Jonah's flight from God. The **second** is the calming of the sea when Jonah was thrown into it—again, something not explicable by mere chance or luck. The **third** is that God provided a fish to transport Jonah. The **fourth** is that Jonah was in the guts of the fish for three days and nights. To me, it appears that the first is providential timing because the storm probably came up like most storms do; the second is more than mere providence because of the suddenness of the sea becoming calm (Mark 4:39); the third is providential as well since fish are always about their tours in the great seas of the world, and the fourth is a plain-old miracle.
- B. I believe that God did not permit other solutions—like rowing back to land or Jonah praying to repent—because this incident was destined to become a sign used by Jesus 750 years later. God arranged this event, and Jonah had to endure it not only because of his disobedience, but because he was going to be a sign for the coming Messiah (Matthew 12:39, 16:4). As the Lord's burial and resurrection have a miraculous component to them, so the sign of Jonah must also have a miraculous aspect. Otherwise, it would not be a "sign" of the sort we are talking about with the resurrection of Christ. As with Ezekiel and other prophets, the prophet's *words* were not the only truth he communicated. Sometimes the prophet himself and his actions, or what happened to him, became signs (Ezekiel 12:11).

C. The text tells us that the fish was exceptionally large. It would have to be huge to hold an adult man. The text does not differentiate between a whale—a warm-blooded air breathing mammal—and a fish—cold-blooded gilled animal. Confusingly, the biggest species of fish is a *whale shark*! This type of *fish* (not whale) may grow to 39 feet in length and many tons in weight. This size of fish is easily large enough to swallow a man, though not every large fish or whale could accommodate a man through its gullet!

Incidentally, I recall over the years people making definitive statements that this animal was definitely a fish, and not a whale, or some similar statement. I am unable to do that from the text. Why not, you ask? Well, the word for fish in Hebrew is דָּג. This word does not differentiate between classes of water-dwelling creatures like we do (fish/whale). I also do not understand why a distinction is supposed to be important.

This fish could have been God's special Leviathan that we read about elsewhere (Job 3:8, 41:1). This creature was a sea monster impossible for man to control. But it was no problem for God.

D. How exactly Jonah could be positioned inside the fish to get enough air to survive is unknown to me. The text does not tell us, nor is God obligated to give us that detail. It is enough to know that God arranged all this to accomplish His purposes, and the omnipotent God is able to do it.

Conclusion

All the events we have read about were under the direct control of God, as is everything in this world. As difficult as things may seem for you, remember that God is in charge.

Remember that you *may* have brought upon yourself some of your situation by sinning against the Lord. Or, maybe not. But consider this--if you are running from God in your life, and things are not going well, you should really consider changing course before you damage other people's lives around you and God metaphorically throws you overboard to straighten you up!