

*The Covenant Pulpit*



**When God Sends a Storm**  
**Jonah 1:11-17**

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It matters little whether you are a sin-hardened thief or a hard-hearted prophet. God will do whatever is necessary to get your attention.

The thief was at the end of his rope. And his rope was a hangman's noose. From the time he was a child, he failed to heed his parent's warnings. He fell in with the wrong crowd. Bad company corrupts good morals, and he became a rebel without a cause. Early on he turned to a life of crime. Eventually he graduated from petty thievery to grand larceny and murder.

There were lots of warning signs along the way. But he chose to ignore them until his conscience died. Now he was a hardened and habitual criminal. The court said that he was beyond redemption and the judge sentenced him to death. Today he and two other condemned criminals would be hanged together in a mass public execution.

As he walked the last mile to his place of death, there was little pity from bystanders. People spat upon him and hurled cruel insults. Parents pointed him out to their children as a warning of what happens to the reprobate. The pious lifted their eyes to heaven and whispered thankful prayers that *they* weren't walking *their* last mile to hell.

But he didn't care about what anyone else thought. He was teetering on the precipice of eternity. Having ignored all the warning signs on the road to perdition, he was now doomed to see those final words etched on hell's gateway: "Abandon hope, all you who enter here." But on the edge of eternity, the thief saw another sign nailed to the cross of the Galilean rabbi who was being crucified next to him. We read about it in St. John's Gospel:

"Pilate wrote a sign and put it on the cross. It read, 'JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.' It was written in Hebrew, in Latin, in Greek. Many of the people read the sign because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city. The leading priests said to Pilate, 'Don't write, 'The King of the Jews.' But write, 'This man said, 'I am the King of the Jews.' Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written.'" (John 19: 19-22)

Why is this sign nailed above the head of Jesus? Why does it trouble the Jewish leaders, and why does Pilate refuse to change it? Why are its words written in three languages, and why is it mentioned in all four gospels?

I believe that God was in that sign because he wanted to save that thief. Pilate didn't intend to spread the gospel. He dictated that sign to send a

brutal message to the Jews. "If any revolutionary gets the idea that he can establish his own kingdom, Rome will crush him like this insect from Nazareth. A crucified criminal is the only Jewish king you will ever get!"

But God used a sign meant to stifle human freedom as an instrument to open the gates of heaven to a criminal staring into hell. Moments before his death, he cries out in Luke 23:42, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He had seen that sign: "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS." This criminal doesn't fully understand who this king is, or what his kingdom is about. All he knows is that he is in a royal mess. When he sees a royal proclamation nailed above the head of Jesus, he uses his last dying breath to beg for a royal pardon.

Do you realize that this sign was the first tool ever used to proclaim the message of the cross? There have been countless gospel tracts, printed sermons, hymns, evangelistic crusades, personal testimonies, and missionary ventures in the 2,000 years since that Friday afternoon. But a crude sign bearing the words of a pagan tyrant preceded them all.

From that sign I learn that there is nothing God won't do to bring one of his chosen people to heaven. He will use a burning bush to call Moses and a talking donkey to set a prophet straight. He will even use cynical words on a wooden placard from a Roman Governor to convert a hardened criminal at the last possible moment of life.

And he will use a ship full of pagan sailors on the way to Tarshish to show his prophet Jonah the truth. He will use a storm at sea to get Jonah's attention. And he will put this rebel in the belly of a great fish to set him on the path of obedience. Hopefully, today he will use the story of Jonah in the same way he used Pilate's sign to show us the King, and the way to his kingdom. Here is the message inscribed on the sign nailed over Jonah:

**When we run from the Father, he drives us into the arms of His Son.**

Like all the storms we face in our lives, Jonah's storm has a divine purpose. Jonah is running in the opposite direction, as far away as he can from God. This is in-your-face, industrial strength rebellion. So God sends a terrifying storm to drive Jonah into the arms of his Only Begotten Son. Some 700 years after Jonah went through that storm, some unbelieving Jewish religious types demanded that Jesus perform a miraculous sign to prove his claims. In an angry outburst of impatience and indignation, Jesus replied in Matthew's gospel:

“A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.” (Matthew 12:39-41)

Did you catch those words of Jesus? “...the sign of the prophet Jonah...” Just as Pilate’s sign pointed the thief to Christ, so Jonah’s storm is a sign pointing us to Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection--a storm story designed to drive us into the arms of Jesus.

I am struck by the fact that Pilate’s sign was printed in three different languages: Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. Those were the three greatest languages in the ancient world. Hebrew was the language of religion; Latin was the language of government; Greek the language of popular culture. Pilate unwittingly declared the gospel in all three of them: **Christ is king!**

There is no language God will not use to reach the wide diversity of people in this world. There is no “one-size-fits-all” evangelistic message. God speaks to each of us in a language that communicates best to who we are. Pilate’s sign was perfectly crafted to speak to that thief in a language that would grip him. Maybe you have heard about “Christ the King” and his salvation message in a multitude of ways during your lifetime. But the words have never grabbed your heart. Today God is speaking again—in the language of Jonah’s story. Listen carefully. The sign over Jonah may speak a language that will connect in a fresh, new way. Here is the gospel of Jonah:

### **1. The STORM: It’s a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a Living God!**

Verse 11 says, “The sea was getting rougher and rougher. Literally the Hebrew says, “The sea was *growing* and *storming*.” The Hebrew verbs speak of the storm inexorably intensifying. Choppy waters have turned into giant mountains of tsunami waves driven by hurricane force winds. Last week we learned the principle that running from God is a downward path. Jonah went *down* to Joppa. He went *down* into the ship. We *lay down* and drifted into the sleep of depression. He goes *down* into the sea, *down* into the belly of the great fish, and *down* to death itself. In Jonah 2:6 the rebellious prophet says that he even went down “into the pit.” The Hebrew word for *pit* was often used by ancient Jews to describe hell itself. Disobedience always takes us down. Not only that, it takes us into storms that get progressively worse.

Verse four tells us the source of the storm: "Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up." Jonah goes down below, and tries to block out the fury of the storm and the screams of sailors by wrapping a pillow around his head. But God won't let him escape that easily. The captain drags him out on deck. The sailors are casting lots to find out who has angered their pagan gods and brought on this storm. Little do they know that the God of Jonah has whipped up this fury. Finally Jonah is forced to confess the inescapable truth in verse 12: "I know that it is my fault that this great storm has fallen on us."

Seven hundred years after Jonah's storm these words appear in Hebrews 10:21: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a Living God." Jonathan Edwards sparked the great revival in Colonial America with his sermon: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." When people heard that sermon, they cried out in fear. Some fainted, and others suffered heart attacks. Proverbs 9:10 is right when it says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Perhaps you have watched that reality TV show, "The Deadliest Catch." It follows crab boats as they fish in the Bering Sea, the most violent body of water on planet earth. As a boy, I fished in a commercial fishing boat in the ferocious seas off the Alaskan coast. I can tell you that there is nothing more frightening than a storm at sea. There are no atheists in stormy seas. The writer of Hebrews does not say, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an *angry* God," but rather a *Living* God. He is not a dead, distant, or irrelevant God. He is alive and passionately jealous. He will not be ignored. He will whip up storms to drive us into his Son's arms. Storms come to tame rebels. If we don't turn around, the storms only grow worse.

## **2. SIN: There is no crystal sea where there is no throne.**

Jonah knows that his rebellion has caused this storm. In verse 12 he says to the sailors, "I know that it is my fault that this storm has come upon you." The Hebrew word for *fault* was a synonym for sin. At its most basic root, sin is rebellion against the King of kings. Disobedience is treason, and treason is a capital crime in every kingdom. God said to Adam, "In the day you eat the fruit, you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:17) But not only did Adam sin and die, he passed sin and death on to his descendants. Romans 5:12 says, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death came to all men, because all sinned."

Jonah becomes a picture of the first Adam. Because of his rebellion, God unleashed a storm of judgment upon him. But every person on that ship

was about to go under. By Jonah's single act of disobedience, death came to everyone. That ship is a picture of a world battered by the deadly storms. Verse four says that the ship was about to break apart. From Wall Street to the Middle East, it seems that our world is coming apart at the seams.

Where will we find peace in stormy seas? St. John tells us in Revelation 4:5, "Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass clear as crystal." There is no storm in this sea. Its surface is as smooth as glass. This sea is calm because it sits before a throne. On it sits a King: the Resurrected King who was crucified by Pilate. In his presence there is peace like glass and righteousness as pure as crystal. But run from the King on that throne and the glassy sea turns to violent storms. There will be no peace on this planet until every knee bows, and every tongue confesses that Jesus is Lord.

### **3. SACRIFICE: By a righteous man's death the lost are saved.**

Now an amazing shift takes place. Jonah goes from being a picture of the first Adam to becoming the perfect type of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Jonah cries out in verse 12, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm..." In other words he is saying, "By one man's death everyone on board the ship will be saved." But the sailors reply in verse 14, "O Lord, do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you O Lord have done as you pleased." Like Pilate with his sign, these pagan sailors unwittingly proclaim the gospel. They called Jonah "an innocent" man. We know that Jonah was no more innocent than was the first Adam. He was a rebel who had brought everyone in his world to the point of death.

But God wants us to see the Second Adam. Jesus was innocent. He never committed a sin. But sinful men hung him on a cross, and he died so a storm-tossed world could be saved. Like Jonah he went *down*: *down* into death, *down* into the belly of a tomb for three days and nights, and *down* into the pit of hell itself. But on the third day, the tomb spit him out alive just as the fish vomited out Jonah. By the death, burial, and resurrection of the Second Adam we are saved. Why did God choose to save us this way? Look again at verse fourteen: "...for you O Lord have done *as you pleased*." It pleased God to save us through the death of his Son. It is the only way of salvation that pleases God; the only one he will accept.

### **4. SELF: Through their own devices the lost are lost.**

In verse 12 Jonah spells out God's solution: the sacrifice of one man for the salvation of everyone else. We read in verse 13, "Instead the men did their

best to row back to land..." God says "my sacrifice" and the people of this storm-tossed world say "our efforts, instead." There are only two ways: God's grace or our works. Look at all they try to do to escape the storms of God's judgment. Maybe you have tried the same things:

### **Crafting Small Idols to Overcome Big Storms**

Verse five says, "All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god." Idols are man-made gods. Idolatry is a perversion of Genesis 1:27: "And man made God in his own image." Idolatry is an attempt at a God makeover. We recreate him to be whatever we need or want him to be. But gods made by people will always be too small. Only the Living God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. Only he is all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present everywhere. If your god is alcohol, or drugs, or money, or pop psychology, or the approval of others—they will be unequal to calming the biggest storms in your life.

### **Throwing Excess Baggage Overboard**

Verse five goes on to say, "And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship." We think that if we can clean up our lives—if we can just throw off some excess baggage—we can stop the hemorrhaging in our lives. If we can shed some pounds. If we could give up our bad habits. If we could offload some emotional baggage. If we could throw our spouse overboard. If we could empty our busy schedule. But lightening the load will never chase away the storms in our lives. There is only one Person who can carry the only load that ever matters: that load of sin that threatens to drag me down to the depths of the bottomless pit of hell. I need to give it to him, to carry it to the cross, and down into the grave where he will leave it forever.

### **Sleeping Down Below**

Verse five concludes, "But Jonah had gone below deck where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep." How many of us escape into the sleep of depression, or drugs, or mindless entertainment, or endless conversation, or pornography or other fantasy escapism? But the storms never abate.

### **Doing Good Deeds**

These sailors are given a way out: the sacrifice of one man for their salvation. Verse 13 says, "Instead the men did their best to row back to land." Literally the Hebrew says that they *dug* their oars into the water. The

original language has the sense of frantic, all-out rowing. I see in this a picture of works-oriented religion: go to church; keep the rules and rituals; do penance and works of charity; work at your holiness in a never-ending effort to earn God's favor. If we row hard enough, we can pull ourselves out of the storms. But our religious rowing won't abate the storm of God's judgment. Verse 13 says, "But they could not, for the sea grew wilder than before..." Man's effort will not save man. There is never enough flesh to overcome the flesh. Self effort is no equal to God's sacrifice. So how do we stop the storms of God's judgment.

#### 5. SUBMISSION: Unless we die first we can never live again.

Jonah had to die to self: "Throw me overboard." Jesus had to die to self: "Not my will Father, but your will be done." And we have to die to self. We have to pull in our oars and **Accept God's Sacrifice**. Verse 15 says, "Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard and the raging sea grew calm." They had to take action by putting all their trust in God's salvation plan. By faith, they had to throw themselves wholeheartedly into it.

We have **To Give our Lives as a Sacrifice**. Verse 16 says, "At this the men greatly feared the Lord and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord, and made vows to him." They turned from their idols and committed their lives to God. They vowed to live for him. They go from salvation to discipleship. Have you gone from conversion to discipleship?

Finally, **Trust Your Future to His Grace**. Verse 17 says, "But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah..." Jonah did what pleased the Lord. It wasn't easy to be thrown into a raging sea. It meant certain death for Jonah. But God was there with a fish. It was a terrifying experience for Jonah to be swallowed by the jaws of death. It was agonizingly-miserable for Jonah to slosh around in the digestive acids in the hot, dark bowels of that monstrous fish. He felt like he had descended into hell itself. But three days later, he was vomited out on dry land. By his grace, God brought a resurrection out of death. He did it for the sailors. He did it for Jonah. He did it for Jesus. And he will do it for you.

This is the gospel of Jonah. Like a sign, Jonah's story points to Christ. A thief saw the sign that pointed to King Jesus. Its language spoke to his heart and led him to Christ. Has Jonah spoken to you in the same way?