



Jonah's Errand

Sermon Growth Guide

April 21, 2024
My Life for Them



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Jonah 1:11-17

Key Verse: Jonah 1:12

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, 'and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.'

Big Idea: The one who loses life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel will find life. (Mark 8:35)

Foundations

Jonah's flight from the Lord continues in this passage. We can count the ways in which he runs away. First, he flees physically by ship. *The Jesus Storybook Bible* says that Jonah went down to the dock and asked the ticket master for a ticket to "not Nineveh, please." Second, Jonah flees psychologically by going into the hold of the ship and going to sleep. This is a common result or means of avoiding stress and distress. Finally, Jonah, in his determination to avoid the call of God, prefers death to going to Nineveh. He tells the sailors to throw him overboard.

Jonah knows that two things will happen if he is thrown into the sea - he will settle his disagreement with God once and for all and the lives of the sailors will be saved by his sacrifice. But the sailors don't want to do this. They try everything in their power to save him. They fail, even when their own lives are on the line. They have been willing to lose their lives for the sake of one life.

The sailors are also more attuned to Jonah's God than Jonah. They do what Jonah has not done - they pray to Jonah's God. They obey the command of the reluctant prophet and toss Jonah into the sea. The winds and waves settle down. The sacrifice of Jonah's life saves the lives of all on board. And God is present in all of this: (1) The sea becomes calm; (2) the sailors learn of the one true God as their lives are saved; (3) and Jonah himself is preserved.

Understanding God's Word

While our English translations use verbs when speaking of things cast into the sea (God sends a wind, sailors throw stuff and Jonah). The Hebrew word is the same throughout: "hurl." God hurls the wind into the sea, the sailors hurl cargo into the sea and they hurl Jonah into the sea.

Sometimes we feel that God hurls things our way - things that are overwhelming. What do we hurl into those circumstances, trying to make them better?

How does Psalm 139 describe our flight from God and God's response to our runaway hearts?

Applying God's Word

In the novel *Moby Dick*, Father Mapple, preacher at the Whaleman's Chapel says, "...if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in the disobeying ourselves wherein the hardness of obeying God consists." How does your own experience demonstrate what Father Mapple says?

Witnessing God's Word

When difficult circumstances overwhelm us like Jonah's storm, how do we face them? When we admit that we are going the wrong way and turn back towards God, that truth-telling can show others where life and truth are to be found.

I used to watch storms travel across the plains from my bedroom window when I was a kid. Storms are fun to watch. They are not fun to participate in. We meet up with Jonah in the middle of a storm with all those around him. Everyone you meet is either in a storm, just out of a storm, or about to enter a storm. Some storms we make ourselves, others come to us from the outside. Either way, God uses the storms in our lives to our benefit and to His glory. The book I'm leaning on the most in this series is Tim Keller's *Rediscovering Jonah*: "Storms can wake us up to truths we would otherwise never see. Storms can develop faith, hope, love, patience, humility, and self-control in us that nothing else can. And innumerable people have testified that they found faith in Christ and eternal life only because some great storm drove them toward God." In the story of ***Jonah's Errand***, Jonah is in the storm. When you are in the storm you ask, "How can I make it stop?" A remarkable thing happens in the story of Jonah. Jonah says, "Throw me in the sea and be saved." ***My Life for Them.***

First, then, the storms. "The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, 'What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?'" (Jonah 1:11) The storm is such a great illustration of the experience of human life. Storms are unexpected life events, interpersonal conflict, unexpected medical issues, job loss, marriage trouble, we have all experienced storms. They come to all of us equally, even to a good church. Karl Barth said the church exists at the strange intersection of divine providence and human confusion. We usually don't see what God is really doing until we look back. The storm on the sea is the perfect image because these moments are extremely disorienting and confusing, even nauseating. Like being tossed about on a ship, reeling and staggering like drunkards, as Psalm 107 says. But God is doing work in the storm. In the storm our values are clarified, we find strength in immovable convictions. In the storm, trust is tested, and either found wanting or strengthened even more. Trust is gained

by spoonfuls and spilled in barrels. The storm asks, where is your trust? But, most of all, storms change our trajectory. No one comes out of a storm the same person that went in. God uses storms to turn us and reorient us toward His purposes. As believers, we can be assured that no suffering is meaningless. Whether we started the storm ourselves or it came over us from the outside, God will use it for His glory and for our good. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) So said Paul, who survived a few storms.

Well, when you are in the storm you ask exactly what the sailors did. How do we stop this? How do we get out of this as soon as possible? They see before them a man who has angered his god. Whoever that god is, it seems to have real power. More power than they have experienced from the gods they cried out to. So, they are afraid. "What do you do when your god is mad? How do you appease the wrath of your god? Tell us what to do." Jonah's answer is a surprise. He says, "my life for them." "'Pick me up and throw me into the sea,' he replied, 'and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.'" (Jonah 1:12) Do you see what a turn this is in Jonah? Jonah ran away from God to refuse the mission to go and extend the mercy of God to non-Hebrews. Here he looks on these non-Hebrews and Jonah feels mercy. They shouldn't have to die for me; I'll give my life for them. Often the breakthrough comes when we are able to see those around us, when we escape the self-pity, self-focused, inward-turning gravity of our own needs and situations and we are able, sometimes right in the middle of our own suffering, to take in the needs of another—any other. I had a dear friend going through chemo. The first time he went, it was hard to fight off self-pity. But then he started meeting others in the cancer center, hearing their stories, understanding their pain, praying for them, cutting jokes for them. He got to where he was eager to go (I mean, to a degree!). He

wanted to bless the others.

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea." This is selfless love. The greatest of loves is selfless, self-giving love. One definition of love is a devotion to act for the well-being of another even at great personal sacrifice. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) I guess Jonah is making some friends. In one way or another, you will spend your life. The only question is what you will spend it on. Jonah realized they were all doomed if he did not do something. Death was coming to swallow all of them, including himself. There was only one thing to do—give his life for theirs. Jonah may have done it more out of desperation than anything else, but he lays his life down. At that moment, he was willing to die to save the lives of the shipmates. Selfless love.

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea." This is substitutionary sacrifice. My life for them. What do I mean by substitutionary sacrifice? It means someone is willing to step into the gap for another, to pay a penalty, to suffer a consequence, to take a punishment they do not deserve for the sake of others. Ernest Gordon was a British POW to the Japanese in World War II forced to work the construction of the Burma-Siam railway. One day at the end of work a shovel was missing. The Japanese officer lined up the POW's and beat them one by one demanding the shovel. Eventually, raging, he commanded "All die!" and a Japanese soldier stepped forward to shoot the first in line. Suddenly one of the men stepped out and said, "I did it. I took the shovel." He was beaten to death in front of Gordon and the others. Returning to camp, they found the missing shovel. They had miscounted. My life for them. That's substitutionary sacrifice.

The disobedience of Jonah against the Lord was a sin. Sin is life-sized. Sin separates us from God to such a degree that our lives are lost. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) We will get to that free gift

later. The wages of sin is death. The sailors saw how big this was. They saw it was life-sized. They didn't want to toss Jonah over. "Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the Lord, 'Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased.'" (Jonah 1:13-14) They are praying to God. Jonah's God. They tried nobly to overcome the storm by their own strength. They cried out to God, knowing they were about to murder a man. They were about to spend a life. When they say Jonah is innocent, they are not challenging God's assessment (which they can clearly see in the wind and waves of the storm) but saying that they did not convict him. Usually there would be at least a short tribunal before making someone walk the plank. We wash our hands of his blood.

"Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him." (Jonah 1:15-16) It worked. My life for them. It worked. That may be as far deep as their new faith goes, but these sailors are now in relationship with the one true God. And Jonah is in the water. The main theme of this book, Jonah, is that God wants us to be deeply concerned for the wellbeing of those outside of our own kin. We can easily categorize and stereotype others, people that are not part of our tribe. "Who are your people?" the sailors asked. We like our people. It is too easy for us to stereotype and dismiss or even disdain those different from us. God forced Jonah into a position of dying for the other. Laying down his life. My life for them. Them! In one way or another, this is what Jesus calls us all to do. First to put our lives in His hands fully, then to allow Him to use us to reach others. "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mark 8:35) You will have to do your own application. I don't know where God is calling you to lay down

some part or all of your life, but I do know, your life in Jesus' hands will have a greater impact on others than you ever imagined.

Jonah is in the water. The sailors are safe. Jonah sinks down into the ocean thinking, "Here I die. This is how it ends. I disobeyed the Lord, now here I am suffering the consequences. I sink into the dark depths of the weight of my sins." Jonah is resigned to die. God says, "Wait a minute." "Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." (Jonah 1:17) The Lord sent the storm. The Lord sent the whale. If the whale had a name, her name was Grace. The whale keeps Jonah alive.

Do you believe it? How do you handle strange stories like this in the Bible? Modern scholarship dismisses miracles through a historical-critical principle called the universality of mankind or *homo sum*. Human experience is all the same. Something like this could not happen because we have not experienced something like this happening. But that's why miracles are recorded. It's kind of the whole point. I want to tell you what happened because stuff like this never happens. Jesus parallels this with His own death and resurrection. That never happens. But try to find another explanation for how hundreds and then thousands of people suddenly all said they saw Jesus alive again after He was dead. Even secular historians fail to do it without admitting they all must have experienced it. I guess there's a story somewhere of a man surviving a whale swallowing for a day or something. I don't need that. Once you believe God became flesh, died on a cross for you, was buried and rose from the dead, it's not such a stretch to think the Creator could use a whale to save Jonah. The Lord sent the whale. "Grace, go swallow Jonah. Burp him up in a few days."

How many days? Three days and three nights. That's what Jesus said about Himself. "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a 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." (Matthew 12:39-40) Have you ever wondered about that? Friday to Sunday. Easter. That's only two nights. Usually, we explain that by the ancient tendency to take the part for the whole; any part of three day/night periods counted as the whole. That's fine. There is another theory. When were the sins of mankind laid on Jesus? Most say on the cross when Jesus cried out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" But others have wondered if it didn't happen in the Garden of Gethsemane. Gethsemane means oil press, where the olives were crushed. He was crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed. Some say our sin fell on Jesus in the Garden. "'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.'" (1 Peter 2:24) It could be that He took our sins on Him when He said, "your will be done" in the Garden of crushing and bore the weight of death all the way through the unjust trial, the shaming, the beating, the bleeding, the striping by whips. Physical death is just a part of it. Death is separation from God. Three days; three nights. Who knows?

But the point is this. Jonah was kept alive in the belly of the whale; Jesus went to death in the heart of the earth. Why could Jonah cry out to God from there? Why can we cry out and be heard by a righteous and holy God when we are buried under the weight of our sin? Because Jesus went even lower than Jonah. Jesus didn't go into the dark of the sea; Jesus went into the abyss of death so we could live and be forgiven. It worked. He rose from the dead. Something greater than Jonah is here. The Galilean who said, "My life for them."