

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

Jonah 1:5-6

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So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish" (JON. 1:6).

In Alexander Dumas's novel, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, Prince Philip languishes in a prison while his twin brother, Louis XIV, sits on the throne of France. Philip is forced to wear an iron mask that hides his identity. The book of Jonah also tells of a man who lost his identity, though for different reasons. Jonah the prophet flees from the presence of the Lord to avoid God's command to preach in hated Nineveh. Boarding a ship for distant Tarshish, Jonah hopes to hide beneath the decks. But, whereas Dumas's Prince Philip is discovered by the famous Three Musketeers, Jonah's identity is disclosed by the sovereign hand of God.

THE MARINERS' PRAYER

Fleeing from the Lord, Jonah paid his fare for the journey to Tarshish. As the boat pulled away from shore, his plan to run from God seemed to be a success. But Jonah had not reckoned on the sovereign persistence of the Lord. Jonah 1:4 tells us, "But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up."

It would be one thing for passengers to be frightened by a storm on the sea, but sailors are used to quite violent winds and waves. The mariners' alarm shows that this was a most terrific tempest, gravely threatening their ship and their lives: "The mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god" (Jon. 1:5).

These sailors provide an instance of natural man's tendency to think of God only under extremity. There may be no atheists in foxholes, but once out of the foxhole most battlefield converts quickly revert to unbelief. This explains one of the reasons for the trials of this world: in his mercy, God seeks to gain man's attention. John Calvin observes: "Hardly any religion appears in the world, when God leaves us in an undisturbed condition. Fear constrains us, however unwilling, to come to God."¹ This tendency points to one of the ways that true believers differ from the rest of mankind. The Christian possesses an all-weather faith. The true spirit of prayer is not one that is summoned only in the midst of terror but that daily rises up from our loving relationship with the God we have come to know and trust.

The sailors did more than simply pray. We should always combine our prayers with the work given to us to do, and in this they are to be commended: "And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them" (Jon. 1:5). It was likely a great deal of cargo that they threw overboard. The whole purpose of such ships was to convey goods from one place to another, so the mariners were throwing out not only their possessions but also their profit.

This reveals the relationship between our lives and our possessions, a difference that we are all too prone to forget. The cargo represented long labor and fond hopes of future wealth. But with their lives at risk, the sailors did not hesitate to jettison their possessions to gain only a slightly increased chance of safety. This is no less true for those with great possessions than for those with few. England's King Richard III cried out in the midst of his defeat in battle: "My kingdom for a horse!" Likewise, any of us will give up any amount of money or possessions to save our lives.

More than that, possessions do not define even the quality of our lives. Jesus said, "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Lk. 12:15). Countless people have reflected on this in the wake of tragedies. A friend told me of returning to his demolished home after it was struck by Hurricane Andrew. Looking on smashed furniture and scattered photographs he realized that these were all just things; what mattered was his life. With what folly we

¹ John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 3:35.

accumulate material over-abundance, seeking the fleeting pleasure of buying clothes, furniture, and toys – much of which is often sold for a pittance at garage sales – while devoting so little effort to matters of the soul.

The actions of the frightened mariners furthermore show how superficially most people think about their problems. The root problem here was not the weight of the cargo, nor even the violence of the storm. Men think in such terms, focusing on circumstances and their proximate remedies. The problem with the ship bound for Tarshish was the sin residing inside its decks. Likewise, mankind's problems arise from the guilt and misery incurred by sin. Like the mariners in the storm, natural man seeks God's help in removing danger but seldom gives any thought to removing sin. William Banks writes: "We are casting overboard the ware and cargo, but the storm continues to rage because sin continues to rule in the hearts of those aboard the ship of life. Nothing weighs a man down as heavily as the burden of sin."²

A PRIMER ON NATURAL RELIGION

The example of the storm-tossed mariners provides a primer on natural religion. It shows that unregenerate men and women are aware of God. nature displays God clearly, especially in the might of great phenomena such as hurricanes and other violent storms. The sailors, most of whom were probably Phoenicians, realized instinctively that a personal divine power stood behind the tempest. The reason that nature reveals the existence of God is that God created it for this purpose. Paul says, "What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them" (Rom. 1:19). Moreover, the universality of prayer in the midst of storms shows that man knows God is able to help and that, properly solicited, he is willing to help.

But there is a fatal limit to natural religion, as also shown by the sailors. The first is that while men know that God exists, they do not know God. "Each cried out to his god" (Jon. 1:5), is another way of saying that each sailor cried out to whatever god he thought might

² William Banks, *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 27.

help him. They were like the Athenians of Paul's time who not only built idols to every god of their imaginations, but also tried to cover the bases with an idol "to the unknown god" (Acts 17:23). The attitude is revealed in the ship captain's plea to Jonah: "Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish" (Jon. 1:6). He meant, in other words, "Maybe you know a god who can help. So give it a try!" This shows that the multitude of false gods worshiped and trusted in our world exist because of man's ignorance of the one true God. At the heart of all idolatry is the problem that while man knows that God exists, man does not know who he is.

A second limitation is seen in their approach to prayer. Just as they do not know who to pray to, natural men and women also do not know on what terms their prayers may be answered. Calvin comments, "They know not whether they will obtain anything by their cries; they repeat their prayers; but they know not whether they pass off into air or really come to God."³

It is these two great problems of mankind that Christianity is designed to address. Natural revelation, though displaying that there is a God, does not tell us who he is. This is why God gave us special revelation in the Bible. Moreover, God, having revealed himself through the prophets and apostles, has given an ultimate revelation of himself through his Son, Jesus Christ (see Heb. 1:1). To learn of Jesus in the Bible and have the Holy Spirit impress his truth upon your heart is to come to a personal knowledge of God. Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). Paul writes that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15).

The believer in Christ therefore knows the God to whom he prays, for his salvation involves a personal relationship with the heavenly Father. Moreover, the Christian knows on what terms he hopes for his prayers to be heard. Since God's Son died for our sins, reconciling us to God the Father, the believer who prays in Jesus' name knows that his prayers are received by God as those of a beloved child. Praying in Christ's name, we say, "Our Father, who art in heaven" (Mt. 6:9, KJV).

³ Calvin, *Minor Prophets*, 3:42.

THE CHURCH ASLEEP

It was precisely to impart this knowledge to sinners that God had commissioned Jonah to preach in the great and evil city of Nineveh. Now, on the ship bound for Tarshish, it was Jonah alone who could tell the mariners of what they needed to know. The problem is that while the pagans were praying, Jonah was sleeping: “But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had laid down and was fast asleep” (Jon. 1:5).

This is a remarkable situation, given the violence of the storm. It is hard to account for the fact that in this great tempest Jonah was soundly sleeping below. Some commentators have suggested that the strain and anxiety of his flight from God had utterly exhausted the prophet. Deep in the bowels of the ship, he had somehow managed to continue his sleep despite the violent storm.

However we account for it, Jonah’s sleep is remarkable in what it says about his spiritual state. Thinking he had escaped God’s presence, Jonah was unaware of approaching danger. His was “the sleep of one who has persuaded himself that he is safe, when in fact he is in grave danger.”⁴

How many others are like him. They think themselves safe in their rebellion against or neglect of God. Life seems good; their affairs seem secure. Yet all the while a storm is fast approaching. Indeed, Christians can be the most presumptuous in this regard, because they have come to know the goodness of the Lord. It is true that they are nurturing besetting sins or neglecting essential spiritual duties. “But God will forgive me,” they think, “because that’s what God is supposed to do.”

It is true that the Bible reveals God as long-suffering and forgiving. But Jonah’s experience reminds us that God’s holiness demands an accounting for sin in the case of unbelievers and the repenting of sins in the case of his own people. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, “The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:6).

⁴ Gordon J. Keddie, *Preacher on the Run: The Message of Jonah* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986), 33.

The mere fact that we may enjoy a spiritual state of peace says nothing about our actual situation with God. O. Palmer Robertson writes, “Jonah had plenty of peace. He was sleeping like a baby. At the very time when he was running from the will of God, he had great peace.”⁵ Yet at the time of God’s choosing the terrible storm struck his ship. Like Jonah in his boat, many people today – Christians and non-Christians – think themselves safe from God’s jurisdiction simply because they keep away from church. But God is able to strike in the world as well as in the church, at sea as well as on shore.

Jonah furthermore provides a picture of the relationship between the church and the world. Why were the mariners in such danger? It was not because of their own sins because of the prophet’s sin! And in like manner the condition of the world in any age may be traced to the condition of the church.

When the church is actively awake, exercising its duty of godliness, prayer, and gospel witness, things go well in the world. In this way, you may trace the world’s advancement in the quality of life – whether through science, medicine, literature, or political science – to the influence of God’s people. Western civilization became the glory of the world because of the glory of Christ in its history. Just one example is the Great Awakening of the 18th century in both England and America in which large portions of society were converted to Christ. Many historians credit this revival with England’s stability in an age of revolution, as well as with the civic virtue that made the American democracy possible. By God’s common grace, some societies have briefly flourished apart from true religion. But wherever the footprints of Christian disciples have marked the earth, they lead to an increase of peace, prosperity, and well-being.

Conversely, the neglect of God and his Word, and especially the abandonment of fidelity to Christ, invariably foreshadows looming clouds of darkness and storm. One example is that of nineteenth and twentieth century Germany. In the nineteenth century, German scholarship assaulted the biblical foundations of the Christian faith. This led to a highly nationalistic church largely devoid of the gospel. In this spiritual vacuum, Adolf Hitler was able to raise the Nazi

⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in Compassion* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 20.

standard and engulf the world in war. Tragically, recent decades tell a similar state of decline in Europe and in America, the results of which are greatly to be dreaded.

In all of these cases, the situation can be largely traced to the failures of the Christian church. Like Jonah's flight, it begins with the rejection of God's Word. And, like Jonah in the Tarshish-bound ship, doctrinely wayward Christians too often have sought refuge in the findings of science, the fashions of secular academia, and the waves of trendy culture instead of standing fast on the solid rock of the Bible. The result is trouble not merely for the church but for the entire society.

This also happens on an individual level. O. Palmer Robertson comments that "you will invariably bring trouble to the life of others as well as to your own life if you are walking contrary to the will of God." He notes that those who minister in prisons have found the Book of Jonah to resonate strongly with inmates. "They know they are running from God. They understand what it means to hurt other people, especially the ones they love, by going against God's will."⁶

Compare Jonah with the apostle Paul in a similar situation. Acts 27 records that Paul's ship was caught in a storm so violent that the crew tossed their cargo overboard (vv. 13-20). But whereas Jonah neglected his duty to arise, pray, and preach to the others, Paul busied himself in these very tasks. The apostle stood before the sailors and reported God's counsel. As a result, the mariners arrived safely to land despite the destruction of their vessel (Acts 27:21-44). In Jonah's case as well as Paul's, it was the conduct of believers that determined the fate of the whole ship's crew.

This illuminates a tragedy in our own time, for like Jonah in the ship the church today is largely asleep in the world. We see this in the neglect of prayer, the disinterest in theology in favor of lifestyle teaching, the casualness with which so many believers approach worship, and a lack of concern to witness the gospel to the surrounding world.

⁶ Ibid., 18-19.

We may summarize the condition of sleep with four observations. First, the sleeping church is unaware of its condition. Sleepers gain consciousness only when they awake. Secondly, in their dreams sleepers often do things that would never happen in wakeful life. People say, “I had the wildest dream last night.” Likewise, the sleeping church engages in behaviors wholly out of step with the godliness set forth in the Bible.

Thirdly, sleepers dislike an alarm. This is why those who seek to awake the church are so often maligned and despised, just as the prophets were stoned in ancient Israel. No sleeper likes the sound of an alarm clock! Fourthly, as Jonah displays, a sleeper neither prays nor preaches the Word of God. A lack of prayer is especially a sign of a sleeping, backslidden church. Like Jonah in the ship, such Christians are embarrassed when others approach and ask for prayer.

This is why it is such a mercy whenever God sends an awakening storm. It was grace that sent Jonah’s storm! God could have let him sleep all the way to Tarshish, to a successful end of his rebellion, but in his grace God did not let him go. Likewise, the Bible reveals that famines, wars, economic depressions, and persecutions not only result from the sleeping state of the church in the world, but they often are God’s remedy to awaken his people. This is why, while the world is busy throwing cargo overboard or pursuing some other frantic attempt at survival, Christians should respond to God’s storm by searching out their own sin. It is sin that disables our witness and work. It is sin that occasions God’s chastening hand. Let us therefore be quick to repent and seek mercy from our gracious God. In that way alone can the church be a source not of danger to the world but of salvation.

THE WORLD’S CRY TO THE CHURCH

The book of Jonah is filled with irony, and one of them is the sight of the pagan ship-captain crying out to awaken the prophet. Jonah was there, after all, because he refused God’s call to cry out to pagan Nineveh. Now, in his rebellion, it is an unbelieving voice that calls him awake. “The captain came and said to him, ‘What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish’” (Jon. 1:6).

This was a *deserved* rebuke. To the captain's eyes, Jonah presented a remarkable instance of sacrilege, sleeping at a time when everyone should be calling on God! To the captain, Jonah presented a shocking spectacle of irreligion, even though Jonah was in fact a holy prophet of the Lord. Yet, as Hugh Martin notes, "What can the world take you for, but what you appear to be?"⁷ Christians tend to consider worldly rebukes to arise from malice, when often the world is rightly dismayed at the conduct of those who claim to know God.

Many Christians today deserve a similar rebuke from the world. Is our presence an instigation to peace and well-being? Are those who take the name of Christ living in a manner consistent with our creed? The world rightly expects us to do so. Martin asks, "Do not we often allow many a precious opportunity to pass without taking advantage of it? Are you careful, believing brethren... in time of trial, adversity, poverty, anxiety, or bereavement, to show the world how the grace of God, how the faith of Jesus, how the fellowship of the Spirit, can suffice to keep your soul in perfect peace and perfect patience?"⁸

Secondly, it was a *needed* rebuke. In the midst of life's storms, the world has great need especially of the prayers of God's people. When a workforce is struck by layoffs, it is the Christians who should be active in the ministry of prayer for those whose jobs are lost. In times of war, Christians are the ones who must pray for peace. When tragedy strikes a family, the Christian neighbors should arrive to help and pray. The world rightly expects and needs this. They do not know how to pray, but they know that we do! As a prophet, Jonah knew the way to gain God's help, so the captain rebuked him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god!" The world either does or should give the same rebuke to Christians today.

The world is capable of achieving much on its own. The world can arrange for earthly riches and pleasurable lifestyles. By God's common grace, the world can solve economic problems and draft war plans. The world does not need the church for worldly things. But there are things for which the world urgently needs the proper witness of the church. The world does not know God. The world does not

⁷ Hugh Martin, *A Commentary on Jonah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1870, reprint 1958), 101.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

know the truth of God's ways. The world does not know how to find salvation from heaven. It is for these purposes that the church exists in the world. How great is the lament when the sleeping church becomes like the world! Let us take up this urgent calling, and, as Jonah was exhorted, let us arise before the world. Let us tell the world about God. Let us pray to God on the world's behalf and teach the world to pray. Let us preach the gospel of Christ, the one way by which the sinful world may find the blessing of heaven's God.

LORD OF THE STORM

In concluding this study of Jonah sleeping in the boat, we must remember another prophet – indeed, the Lord of the prophets – who also slept on a storm-tossed boat. The Gospels tell us of Jesus in the boat with his disciples, crossing the Sea of Galilee. The disciples woke him, crying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing” (Mt. 8:25). Jesus slept not in rebellion against God but in the great peace of his sovereign might. So unlike Jonah, who does not seem to have either risen or prayed, Jesus did arise. Mark 4:39 says, “He awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.”

Jesus could do what no one else could, not even a prophet like Jonah. Jesus could still the storm because of his divine and sovereign might. Jesus can also still the storm of God's wrath on our sin. Jonah's sin had caused Jonah's storm, and likewise it is our sin that brings God's wrath. It was for this that Jesus died on the cross, paying the penalty our sins deserved and achieving for us an eternal peace with God.

Do you want to know what the mariners did not understand? Do you want to know how to pray so as to gain God's help and salvation? The answer is to pray in the name of Jesus, through faith in the shedding of his blood for our sins. God has made Jesus the way to salvation. John writes, “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12). And as children of God through faith in Jesus, the Lord of the storms, we may know that our prayers are heard and that God is on our side.

If we realize this and have come to God through faith in Christ, then let us heed the world's and the Bible's cry to the church. Let us be

active in worship, prayer, service, and witness. Paul exhorts: “Walk as children of light... and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord... ‘Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you’” (Eph. 5:8, 14).