

## FEARING THE LORD

Jonah 1:7-10

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And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (JON. 1:9).

**T**he book of Numbers records that as Moses led Israel towards the Promised Land, the tribes of Gad and Reuben asked to settle down in the fertile lands east of the Jordan River. This troubled Moses, since Canaan, west of the Jordan, contained the Promised Land. But he was willing to relent, on the condition that their armed men would fight with the others until the land had been secured for all twelve tribes. Gad and Reuben agreed, but Moses warned them: "If you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the LORD, and be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23).

Moses' principle would be proved repeatedly throughout the Old Testament: "be sure your sin will find you out." It was learned by Achan, who stole forbidden treasure from the sack of Jericho, so that God was angered and Israel was defeated in battle. It was discovered by King David, after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. David used all his royal power to tie the loose ends so that no one would learn of his sin. But, the Bible says, "the thing that David had done displeased the LORD" (2 Sam. 12:27), and David's sin was found out and punished severely.

### THE SINNER'S EVASION

**S**o it was for Jonah, who had slept soundly in the hold of the ship bound for Tarshish. His flight from the Lord seemed to start well.

But when a violent tempest struck the ship, Jonah's sin was brought under scrutiny. Not that everyone realized this at first:

initially, the sailors simply woke Jonah and called him to pray (Jon. 1:6). But, this having produced no positive results, the sailors struck upon another solution. “They said to one another, ‘Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us’” (Jon. 1:7).

The behavior of the mariners is telling. They seem to have been hard-working and competent men. But like dedicated public servants who seek to solve society’s problems today, the difficulties were simply too great. Their confusion was not surprising, since the one man with the information to help them – the prophet Jonah – was sleeping in the hold. Whenever the world is desperate and confused, this is a sign that the church is asleep in the world. For unless the church gives light to the world, the world must persist in darkness. So it is with the proliferation of psychic shops and astrology charts in the West: when the sleeping church ceases to speak God’s truth to the world, the world becomes desperate.

The mariner’s appeal to lots also typifies man’s sense of sin. So terrific was the storm that they rightly concluded that divine vengeance was its cause. They inferred that their ship contained at least someone who had offended the angered deity. Yet by casting lots, each of them deflected their own complicity. If God was angry, they believed, he must be angry with someone else, since none could think of anything he had done to incur such fierce wrath.

This perfectly depicts the natural man’s attitude towards his own sin. People are willing to admit that they have not always done right and have sometimes done wrong. “But nothing that might deserve God’s special wrath,” they nonetheless conclude. Gordon Keddie comments: “People will admit a degree of fault and weakness in their lives, but will not readily agree that they are bad enough to merit the wholly justified wrath of God.”<sup>1</sup> This is why, when tragedy strikes, people are often angry with God rather than fearful of God. Jesus said, “Every-one who commits sin is a slave to sin” (Jn. 8:34), and the master does not like to be exposed. But God is not deceived, and the terrible storm wracking Jonah’s ship exemplified God’s wrath on all sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Preacher on the Run: The Message of Jonah* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986), 41.

Had Jonah been occupied with his duty as a prophet, proclaiming both law and gospel to the world, the situation might have been different. But as it was, instead of each sailor casting himself before God in repentance, the lots were brought forth to discern what great sinner was on board. The situation is the same today. So long as man's conscience remains dulled to his sin he prefers other options to faith in Jesus Christ. Only when man has seen the justice of God's wrath towards his sin, for which purpose God has given his law, will man seek the Savior God has provided and yield his heart to Christ.

## CASTING LOTS

The use of lots for divination was widespread in the ancient world. The Hebrew text's literal description of the sailors' procedure indicates that some kind of dice were likely used, just as the Romans soldiers did to divide Jesus' garments at the cross (Mk. 15:24). God's people also used such means for divine guidance. The high priest's Urim and Thummim served this purpose (cf. Ex. 28:30). Saul was chosen as Israel's first king by the casting of lots (1 Sam. 10:21), and the law provided several circumstances in which God's people were to appeal to him for knowledge in this way (cf. Lev. 16:8; Num. 33:54).

The right use of lots was in seeking God's will and in acting so as to demonstrate impartiality. Casting lots was a way of saying, "Let it be God's will that decides." When appealed to in a right spirit, God spoke through the lots. But even when lots or other instruments of chance are used in an ungodly way, God's sovereignty is not overthrown. Proverbs 16:33 declares, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD."

Are there godly uses of lots today? To answer, we must first realize how our situation is different from that of Old Testament believers. There are no examples in the post-Pentecost church of believers seeking information from God through instruments of chance. The last instance was the selection of Matthias to replace Judas as one of the twelve disciples (Acts 1:26). The uniqueness of this situation is obvious. But after the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell God's people, lots were never used again. When the first deacons were selected, it was not by lots but by the Holy Spirit speaking through

the will of the congregation (Acts 6:5). With the canon of Holy Scripture now complete, Christians are not to seek special means of divine revelation. Instead, James says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (Ja. 1:5). William Banks writes: “The Holy Spirit, who now indwells all believers, teaches them and guides them into truth. The throne of God is accessible through the blood of Jesus Christ, and we have confidence that God hears and answers our prayers.”<sup>2</sup>

But this does not mean that there are no proper uses of lots today. There may be extraordinary occasions where a Christian rightly uses lots to cast himself upon God’s providence. For instance, a general who cannot decide which unit to send into battle and cannot bear the responsibility for the terrible outcome, might cast lots as an appeal to God’s sovereign will. Another proper use of lots is to promote peace by avoiding partiality. Thus football games begin with a coin toss to determine which team will kick off first. My grandfather used this procedure in his will. Knowing that my father and uncle were not the best of friends, he directed that they take turns selecting from his personal items with a cut of the cards deciding who would go first. It was a wise and effective procedure that succeeded in avoiding ill-feeling.

With these carefully limited categories noted, we should realize that in the vast majority of cases today the use of lots and other instruments of chance is ungodly. People love to rely on “luck” for easy riches or some other worldly gain. But there is no such thing as “luck.” All things are determined by God’s sovereign will. Jesus pointed out that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from God’s will (Mt. 10:29). All the wealth that we have comes from God, who generously answers the prayers of those who come to him with needs. Therefore, those who gamble in a spirit of pride and greed sacrilegiously mock God’s sovereignty. Christians should thus lament the advanced state of civic depravity displayed by our state-run lotteries. Not only do these government lotteries undermine the virtues of hard work and prayer, while promoting the vices of sloth and greed, but they are proven to prey especially on the poor. A

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<sup>2</sup> William Banks, *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 31.

similar concern must be raised when raffles or lotteries are used to raise money for good causes, in which case greed may not be the motive. Keddie rightly concludes: “Whether for the enrichment of a ‘winner’ or the benefit of ‘a good cause’, [lotteries] are surely to be rejected as the circumvention of God’s means for the provision of our needs – namely, work (2 Thes. 3:6-13) and genuine charity from individuals, the church and the state.”<sup>3</sup>

## SIN FOUND OUT

Whatever God thought of the sailors and their casting of lots, it was his own intention that Jonah should be revealed. Verse 7 thus reports, “So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.”

The original readers of Jonah would immediately think of an earlier episode from Israel’s history, in which another sinner was unmasked by lot. Joshua had led Israel across the Jordan River for their miraculous conquest of the fortress city of Jericho. God ordered that Jericho be completely devoted to destruction as an instance of divine judgment. Therefore, he warned the people: “Keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it” (Jos. 6:18). This was a stern and specific warning, but one Israelite, Achan, fell into temptation. He took from Jericho a rich cloak, 200 shekels of silver and a large bar of gold. “I coveted them and took them,” he later confessed, and buried them beneath his tent (Jos. 7:21).

What happened next showed how one sinner affects the entire church. After Jericho, the next city to be taken was Ai, which was so weakly held that an easy victory was expected. Instead, the Israelites were driven off with the loss of thirty-six dead. When Joshua complained to the Lord, God replied: “Israel has sinned... they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies” (Jos. 7:11-12). The sin must be exposed and repented of, God insisted, before his favor returned to Israel’s arms.

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<sup>3</sup> Keddie, *Preacher on the Run*, 40.

God told Joshua what to do. All Israel was assembled the next morning and the lot was cast. The first lot revealed the tribe of Judah, so the whole tribe was brought forth. The next lot showed the clan of Zerah. The next lot fell on the house of Zabdi. Imagine the tension as the house of Zabdi stood before Joshua and the Lord. The lot was cast again, and it fell on Achan. Joshua approached him and said, “My son, give the glory to the Lord God of Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me” (Jos. 7:19). Achan confessed, “Truly I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel” (Jos. 7:20). Achan’s stolen goods were revealed and then not only Achan, but also his sons and daughters, his oxen and donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, as well as the silver and the cloak and the bar of gold he had stolen, were taken to the Valley of Achor. There Achan and his family were stoned to death and the whole was put to fire. Finally, a great heap of stones was erected atop Achan’s household as a memorial to future generations.

With this in mind, imagine the look on Jonah’s face when it was announced that lots would be cast. See him cringe as every footstep thumped on the planks down into the hold as the captain came to bring the news. “Jonah,” he may have begun, and Jonah would have already started to nod his head, “the lot has fallen on you.”

How would you respond if you were Jonah? Would you contest the falling of the lots? Would you wrack your mind for some desperate denial? Would you play it cool and shrug it off? Jonah did none of these, for he saw in the lots the finger of God. So he replied, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (Jon. 1:9). And then he told them all about his flight from the presence of the Lord (Jon. 1:10).

I wonder if Jonah remembered Joshua’s words to Achan: “My son, give the glory to the Lord God of Israel”? as well as Achan’s reply, “Truly I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel”? This is what God calls each of us to do: to own our sin before him and glorify him in his righteous judgment. This is the plea that comes to us in the cross of Jesus Christ. Just as the captain brought Jonah the message that his sin was found out, the cross tells us all that God has seen our sins. Even when the holy Son of God was bearing our sins, God did not relent from pouring out his just wrath on Jesus. The cross tells

the world that God has seen our sin and that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

But those who know God also know that he is a God of grace. Jonah should have known this. His prior labor as a prophet involved preaching God's grace in Israel, and it was out of resentment for God's offer of grace to wicked Nineveh that he boarded this ship for Tarshish. But Jonah shows our great need not merely to understand the doctrines of grace but to feel our personal need for the grace of the doctrines. God proclaims this grace at the same cross that displays his uncompromising justice against our sin. In the cross of his only beloved Son, God offers us a way of salvation, through faith in the blood of the Lamb of God, who bore our sins in his body on the tree. Though we suffer temporal effects from our sin, like Achan did and Jonah would, God offers salvation for our eternal souls. Jonah does not seem to have yet been ready to seek God's grace, but at least he confessed his sins. John Calvin comments: "If then we wish God to approve of our repentance, let us not seek evasions, as for the most part is the case; nor let us extenuate our sins, but by a free confession testify before the whole world what we have deserved."<sup>4</sup>

## FEARING THE LORD

This pivotal episode in Jonah's life provides a number of useful observations. The first is its clear statement of the church's true occupation. The sailors asked Jonah: "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation?" (Jon. 1:8). Having awakened from sleep, Jonah gave the proper answer: "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD" (Jon. 1:9). The New International Version renders this, "and I worship the LORD." The connection is a good one, because to worship God is to fear him. William Banks explains, "The fear of the Lord is not a servile, cringing type of fear but involves the idea of worship. It means reverential awe, trust, and respect."<sup>5</sup> This is what Christians are called by God to do in this world; worshipful fear of God is the proper occupation of the church.

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 3:52.

<sup>5</sup> Banks, *Jonah*, 35.

The fear of the Lord contrasts with fear of the world. Christians are to do God's work in God's way for God's purposes. When we seek the world's work or the way's ways or the world's purposes we lose our relevance and our usefulness to the world, just as Jonah did to the ship. R. T. Kendall writes, "The solution to making the message of the church 'relevant' to the world is not to be found by concealing our identity... We have been told what we need to do is mix with the world... The idea is that we must adjust our message so that the man in the street will now accept it. We have been doing it for years, bringing the message down, step by step; yet 'modern man' is unimpressed."<sup>6</sup>

So it was with Jonah: the mariners did not even know who he was. They did not know his occupation or who was his God. The church, like Jonah, is called to fear the Lord, and the result of a God-fearing church is that the world knows what it is and which God he served. It is the sleeping church that fears the world and looks for relevance in worldliness. But when the church is truly awakened, the first sign is that it fears the Lord. However incomplete was Jonah's repentance at this point, he still gave the very definition of a true, awakened Christian: "I fear the Lord."

Secondly, note the relationship between Jonah's fear and the sailors' fear. Jonah declared himself a fearer of the one true God, "the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jon. 1:9). What was the result? "Then the men were exceedingly afraid" (Jon. 1:10). The storm had made them "afraid" (Jon. 1:5), but learning of the God who not only sent the storm but created the sea and dry land made them "exceedingly afraid." Literally, the text says, "They feared a great fear." They were shocked that Jonah had sinned against *this* God.

The mariners would likely have heard about the Hebrews and their shocking God. He was the God who broke Pharaoh's power in order to set his people free, and who parted the waters of the Red Sea to pass the Hebrews through, but then drowned the pursuing Egyptians. This was the stern God who took his people into the wilderness for forty years to teach them to fear him, but then led them into Canaan with such frightening power. Therefore, they realized, fearing a great

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<sup>6</sup> R. T. Kendall, *Jonah: An Exposition* (Atlanta: Authentic, 2006), 38.

fear, that “this was a great God, this God of the Hebrews; and it was this God, not a weak god, who was pursuing them for the sake of Jonah.”<sup>7</sup>

This shows that when the church is awake, God uses the church to awaken the world. Christians wonder why there is no fear of God in the society around us. The reason is that there is so little fear of God in the church. History reveals that great revivals always begin in the church: Christians regain their vision of the great and holy God they serve; they fear him; they revere him; they grasp with awe the saving message of grace in Jesus Christ. And from such a church, the fear of God spreads out to the world, so that many seek the salvation God has provided in the gospel of his Son. But until the church regains its own identity and awakens to the fear of its God, there is no way for world around to fear the Lord.

This leads to a third point that Jonah shows us: those who fear the Lord will speak to the world for God. Kendall writes: “When his identity was revealed, then he began to *preach* to them. He ‘told’ them. Thus our identity is tied to the fact that it is *preaching* the Gospel that will save, and preaching is something that we can all do.”<sup>8</sup> The awakened, God-fearing church preaches God’s Word *boldly* to the world, and finds anew that God’s Word is a mighty, sharply edged sword, before which even the mightiest of men tremble before God at the hearing of his Word.

But the church must preach the whole Word of God, including both law and gospel. The mariner’s trembled because of the storm, especially when they learned whose storm it was. And unless Christians are willing to proclaim the holy and just wrath of God against sin and sinners, then our gospel promises will ring hollow in peoples’ ears. Had Jonah declared, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD,” when he first boarded the ship, the impact would not have been so powerful. But amidst the howling winds of divine wrath, his preaching caused a great fear, so that the sailors really did fear the Lord.

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<sup>7</sup> James M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vol. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), I:276.

<sup>8</sup> Kendall, *Jonah*, 41-42.

It is from this vantage point that we see what a blessing it is when God sends the storm to bring his people to repentance. It was a hand of divine grace that tore the mask from Jonah and uncovered his sin. God's purpose was to restore the prophet's godly fear. This is why God did not shut down the storm as soon as Jonah confessed. The storm still raged as Jonah and the mariners trembled; the temporal consequences of sin must still be felt. Hugh Martin writes:

Therefore, to deepen your repentance and confirm it; to inspire you with a holy terror of like iniquity in time to come; to grave painfully and burningly into your heart and memory experiences and recollections that shall rise swiftly to the aid of your integrity and virtue, if tempted to like offence again; God may see meet to prolong the storm that He has awakened, even after it may have been blessed to bring you to repentance.<sup>9</sup>

So let us learn our lesson early and well. Let us bless the hand of chastisement, seeing the grace that directs it. Let us embrace God's call to repentance for our sin and slumber and let us long to fear the Lord. Are you willing to do this? Are you ready and eager for the state of your soul to be searched? Are you confident that your ship contains no Jonah – that there is no Achan in your camp? And if there is, will you give to glory to God when it is revealed? Be assured, Christian, that God has found out your sin and will bring it to light. Be assured that the Lord of storm intends for you to fear him as you ought.

But rest assured as well, that there is no greater good that God might perform in your life and no better way for him to give meaning to your time in this world. For when God's discipline has brought you back to his cross – the place where sin is confessed and cleansed – you may stand before heaven and earth and exult with unmasked heart: "I am a Christian, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land, and sent his own Son with boundless love to redeem me through his blood, that I may declare his glory forever." And then God will use you to bring his message of fear and grace to the world.

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<sup>9</sup> Martin, *Jonah*, 169.