

JONAH THE SCAPEGOAT

Jonah I:11-16

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He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you" (JON. I:12).

In the early hours of October 16, 1946, Lutheran minister Henry Gerecke paid a visit to members of his small congregation in Nuremburg, Germany. This was no ordinary congregation, since the men he was visiting were about to be executed for committing the vilest crimes imaginable. One by one, Gerecke walked with his congregants to the gallows. When the noose was placed over the first man's head and he was asked for his last words, he gave testimony to his faith in Jesus Christ: "I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. May God have mercy on my soul." His name was Joachim von Ribbentrop, and until the previous year he had been the foreign minister of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. When first visited by Gerecke in the Nuremburg prison where the war crimes trial was taking place, Ribbentrop had listed a long string of objections to the Christian faith. But under the faithful preaching of the gospel in the prison chapel, he had been thoroughly converted and saved.

Not all of Gerecke's parishioners were converted. One of them was Herman Goering, chief of the German Luftwaffe and Hitler's closest colleague. Goering also attended chapel, but when Gerecke visited him on that last evening, Goering mocked Christianity. Within minutes after the pastor left him, Goering committed suicide.

But others were more like Ribbentrop. When Gerecke first visited the cell of Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, chief of the German Armed Forces, he found Keitel reading his Bible and professing Christ. Two

others, Fritz Sauckel, the Nazi Head of Labour Supply, described as the cruelest slave master since Pharaoh, and Wilhelm Frick, who as Minister of the Interior oversaw a reign of terror that had targeted many Christians, went to the scaffold confessing their sins and asking for forgiveness from God through faith in Christ. In all, eight of the Nazi war criminals were accepted at the Lord's Table by Chaplain Gerecke on the basis of a credible profession of faith in Christ.¹

THE MARINERS' MERCY

Not everyone is prepared to accept the idea of the grossest sinners finding salvation in Christ. This is why Gerecke received so many abusive letters for ministering to the Nazis when he returned to America. Had the prophet Jonah been living, he might have sent one of these letters. God had ordered Jonah to preach for the salvation of the savage murderers in Nineveh, but Jonah decided to abandon God rather than accept the job. Jonah's experience has shown the futility of running from God. But as the story unfolds with Jonah's judgment, the irony of his rebellion is revealed through the actions of the pagan mariners on board Jonah's ship.

Terrified by the great storm God had hurled at their ship because of Jonah, the sailors had first prayed to their own false gods. They then had cast lots to identify the sinner responsible for the divine wrath. When the lot fell on Jonah, they began quizzing him. Jonah confessed, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land" (Jon. 1:9).

The sailors were "exceedingly afraid" when they realized that Jonah was reveling against such a great God as that. So they appealed to Jonah, who still was a prophet of the Lord: "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" (Jon. 1:11). Jonah answered that they should "pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you" (Jon. 1:12).

What then happened was remarkable because of the nobility of the mariners' conduct. Hugh Martin writes, "A perfect stranger he was to

¹ Cited from Don Stephens, *War and Grace* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2005), 253-271.

them. No ties of friendship, or acquaintance, or kin, or country could he plead; and the subject of a strange but strong God, bringing down his God's wrath on them – verily, they had little to thank him for.”² The only thing Jonah had ever done for them was bring them into trouble. So one could try to excuse them if they simply tossed him overboard, especially since these were pagan idolaters and since Jonah himself had suggested this solution.

But, instead, the sailors were motivated by the sanctity of Jonah's life. Instead of tossing him overboard, “the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them” (Jon. 1:13). The Hebrew text indicates that the sailors “dug into” the waves, so hard did they row in their attempt to win Jonah's safety ashore. They realized that their safety required his removal, but they exerted themselves to the utmost to spare his life. Whether their respect arose from his special status as a prophet or merely from his general standing as a human being, the fear of the Lord is manifested in their conduct. They show us that just as a disregard for God always shows forth in cruelty towards man, the fear of the Lord invariably produces both justice and mercy.

What a reproach this was to Jonah. After all, the reason he was on the ship was his hardness of heart towards Gentiles. O. Palmer Robertson comments: “He, the believer, closes his heart toward the massive metropolis of Nineveh. Although his people had experienced the grace of God for generations, he closes his heart to another people. But in dramatic contrast these coarse sailors do everything they can to spare the life of Jonah, even after he has caused the loss of all their cargo, and now may cause their loss of life.”³

God, however, did not cooperate with the merciful mariners. However hard they rowed, they could not overcome the increasingly raging seas. It was God's will for Jonah's chastisement to continue, so nothing the sailors could do succeeded in sparing his life. “Therefore they called out to the LORD, ‘O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD,

² Hugh Martin, *Jonah*, 174.

³ O. Palmer Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in Compassion*, 24-25.

have done as it pleased you.’ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging” (Jon. 1:14-15).

Here, too, we see the impact of Jonah’s unwitting witness on the sailors. Faced with no alternative but to accept Jonah’s counsel, they first prayed to Yahweh asking him not to hold them responsible, since it was obviously his sovereign will that controlled their situation.

How do we account for the nobility of these men who did not know the Lord? The answer is found in God’s common grace. Common grace observes that God is at work in the world even apart from the realm of salvation. God instills virtue in heathen kings and inspires a reverence for life among even the pagans. God provides this common grace for the sake of the gospel, so that the world might continue and his church preserved in the midst of a wicked world, and also to preserve the world for the sake of those who yet will be saved.

The mariners also display an awareness of what is called natural law. It is doubtful that they had ever read the Ten Commandments, with God’s mandate that “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13). Yet they still knew that it is wrong to take human life needlessly. John Calvin comments: “There is by nature implanted in all an abhorrence of cruelty... Though these men had never known the doctrine of the law, they were yet so taught by nature that they knew that the blood of man is dear and precious in the sight of God.”⁴

Both common grace and natural law are still in evidence today. And sometimes the virtue of pagans embarrasses the people of God who possess saving grace and know the written law of God. We think, for instance, of the heroism by which the New York City firemen cast away their own lives trying to save others in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The majority of them do not seem to have been true believers in Christ, yet their valor exceeds that of many Christians. Whenever God’s people witness such virtue in unbelievers, we should feel a reproach if God’s saving grace has not produced at least the like in us.

⁴ John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 3:60.

THE MARINERS' CONVERTED?

A question arises at this point for which there is little scholarly consensus. The question is whether or not the account in Jonah reveals a true conversion of the mariners. Were they operating strictly out of common grace, or at some point did they come to a true and saving knowledge of the Lord?

An impressive array of voices concludes that there is not sufficient reason to see this as a true conversion, including John Calvin, George Hutchinson, Douglas Stuart, John Mackay, William Banks, and Peter Williams. Calvin states that they “were not suddenly so changed as to devote themselves to the true God... it was not such a real and thorough conversion of the soul as changed them into new men.”⁵ Douglas Stuart supposes that instead of embracing true Old Testament faith, the sailors merely “added Yahweh to the god(s) they already believed in.”⁶ William Banks assesses: “The fear they showed could have been only temporary, lacking true piety.”⁷ As a pastor, I understand this skepticism. I have found that those who profess faith in Christ with an ulterior motive are often found to have done so insincerely. A man wants to marry a Christian girl, so he professes faith to her father. Or soldiers in battle promise religion in order to get out alive. Such professions of faith should be viewed skeptically until true faith is evidenced in a changed life.

Nonetheless, I think there is ample evidence to believe that these mariners were truly converted through their experience with Jonah’s God. This is the view held by James Boice, R. T. Kendall, Thomas McComiskey, Hugh Martin, O. Palmer Robertson, Jacques Ellul, and Gordon Keddie. What is the evidence for this positive view?

First, I am influenced by the way such a conversion fits in the overall narrative of Jonah. The prophet had feared that his preaching in Nineveh would lead pagans to find mercy in God’s grace. It follows that God should teach him a lesson in the conversion of the pagan sailors. Moreover, the mariners’ conversion should be considered no more implausible than that of Pastor Gerecke’s Nazi war criminals –

⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁶ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 464.

⁷ William Banks, *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 42.

of for that matter, of anyone else's conversion. It took no more grace for them to be saved than it took for any Christian to be saved.

Furthermore, the language of the mariners' prayer suggests more than that they simply added Jonah's God to their list of false gods. Calvin, who writes so strongly on this point that we almost must list him as being both against and for the idea of the mariners' conversion, says, "The sailors and the passengers were not only touched with the fear of God, but that they also had the impression that the God of Israel was the supreme King of heaven and earth." Realizing this, they also realized that "they were previously deluded, and that whatever the world had invented was mere delusion, and that the gods devised by the fancies of men were nothing but mere idols."⁸ Bryan Estelle points out that the phrase "You, O LORD, have done as it pleased you," occurs only three times in the Old Testament. In both of the other cases the context clearly features the rejection of false gods, so it is reasonable to take it with this meaning here as well.⁹

Furthermore, we read that the sailors "offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows" (Jon. 1:16). They called on God's covenant name, Yahweh, and while they did not know the proper procedures for the Levitical sacrifices in Jerusalem they seem to have understood their need for some offering of atonement for sin. The taking of vows is probably to be understood as a confession of covenant fidelity. Calvin writes: "When, therefore, the sailors vowed a vow to God, they renounced their own idols... Now then they made their vows to the only true God; for they knew that their lives were in his hand"¹⁰

The sailors had experienced a once-in-a-lifetime divine encounter the could never be forgotten. In this way, God had sent the storm not only to awaken his wayward prophet, but also to provide the pagans a display of his saving power. Who knows but that these Tarshish-bound mariners were the seeds for the later and wider knowledge of God in Spain. We remember the apostle Paul's fervent desire to preach the gospel in Spain; perhaps God was preparing the ground through these sailors (see Rom. 15:24). Thomas McComiskey summarizes their experience: "The sailors have made a life-changing

⁸ Calvin, *The Minor Prophets*, 3:64.

⁹ Bryan Estelle, *info*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

discovery because they have come into contact with the living God. They make such offerings as they can then and there, but plan to do more, formulating their intentions into vows to be carried out later.”¹¹

We should make a couple of observations on this conversion. One is that we should not be intimidated by the world’s unbelief, so that we lower our message to its level. The same God “who made the sea and dry land” (Jon. 1:9) and converted the pagan sailors is able to win converts through our witness to anyone. We should also learn that God will save whomever he desires whether we are faithful and obedient or not. Jonah’s willingness to witness to the Gentiles did not determine God’s will for their salvation; all it determined was whether or not Jonah would be blessed by it. As it was, Jonah went beneath the waves without witnessing the mariners’ sacrifice or hearing their vows. James Boice writes:

What God is going to do, he will do... But notice, God can do this through the obedience of his children, as he does later with Nineveh through Jonah, in which case they share in the blessing. Or he can do it through his children’s disobedience, as here, in which case they miss the blessing... Which will it be in your case? Will you resist him? Will you refuse his Great Commission? Or will you obey him in this and in all matters?¹²

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When we turn our consideration towards Jonah, we also have a question on which there is disagreement. When Jonah asked to be thrown into the sea, did this express his sincere repentance over his sin or rather his hardened resolve to suffer even death rather than to give in to God’s will. Those who argue for Jonah’s repentance argue that his acknowledgement of guilt made him willing to suffer death in order to spare the pagan sailors. But there is one main reason why I do not believe that Jonah had yet relented in his rebellion to God, and that is that there is no suggestion of him resolving to return and carry out the commission God had given him. Jonah does repent until chapter 2, and when he does repent he goes to Nineveh and preaches as God commanded. William

¹¹ Thomas McComiskey, *Title, etc.*, 563.

¹² James M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vol. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), I:280.

Banks comments, “If the tempest served to harden Jonah’s will, it meant that Jonah was willing to perish rather than to preach. Bigotry can become so ingrained in the human personality that not even the threat of physical harm or punishment will eradicate it, nor will arguments and appeals to reason.”¹³ With this bitter spirit, Jonah faced the waters of his doom. He would rather die than preach for the salvation of hated Nineveh. Whereas the sailors were willing to submit to the revealed will of God, Jonah, who knew better what the will of God is, would rather be consigned to the waves.

Anyone who has witnessed or read about burials at sea knows how solemn they are. How much more so when the victim is still alive and is cast over to drown in the deep! They all expected Jonah’s sacrifice to calm the storm, just as they acknowledged it as a just punishment for Jonah’s sin. But if anything proves that a believer can become so hardened by sin as to completely destroy his or her life in this world, the experience of Jonah proves it. No wonder the writer of Hebrews exhorts us, “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13).

But more important than Jonah’s subjective state of mind is the objective role he plays in God’s redemptive history. For in the Bible’s teaching of redemption, Jonah’s “death” beneath the waves looks both backward and forward. Looking backward, Jonah plays the same role as the scapegoat on Israel’s Day of Atonement. On the one day each year when the sin of Israel was dealt with, God ordained that the high priest would come to the tabernacle with two live goats. One of the goats, chosen by lot, would be sacrificed for sin; the other goat – the scapegoat – was sent away into the wilderness (Lev. 16:7-10). This was the role Jonah played for the salvation of the mariners. Just as Aaron laid his hands on the scapegoat, placing their sins on its head, and sending it away into the distant wilderness (Lev. 16:21-22), so also Jonah removed God’s wrath by taking his sin into the wilderness of the deep. Even the use of lots to identify Jonah suggests an intentional connection. His sacrifice removed God’s wrath from the ship so that peace was restored between man and God.

¹³ William Banks, *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 37.

Jonah's "death" in the deep also looks forward in redemptive history, finding its ultimate meaning in the death of Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who compared his own death to that of Jonah: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Mt. 12:40). There are major differences between Jonah and Jesus, of course. Jonah is guilty of his own sin, having refused God's will. Jesus bore only the sins of others, in obedience to the will of the Father. Jonah, then, is a type of Christ, that is an Old Testament figure who represents at least one aspect of Jesus and his saving work. Jacques Ellul explains the connection: "If it is true that the sacrifice of a man who takes his condemnation can save others around him, then this is far more true when the one sacrificed is the Son of God."¹⁴

Jonah's death in the waves causing the storm's removal shows that God's way of salvation involves the placing of sins upon one who will die. And just as salvation for Nineveh will come from Jonah's resurrection-like salvation in the belly of the great fish, so also the resurrection of Jesus Christ brings salvation to the world. In Jonah, Robertson explains, "God pursues one man to the death that he might bless the many." Likewise, "God pursued his own Son even to the death that many from every nation under heaven might be saved."¹⁵

BUT JONAH, BUT THE LORD

God used the sleeping witness of his rebellious prophet to reveal himself to the sailors. The "but Jonah," that led to his rebellion was overcome by the "but the Lord" that sent the storm. How often this has been the case with God's people. R. T. Kendall writes: "The fact that the church is not what she ought to be at the present moment does not mean that God cannot use us. For God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line and that is precisely what happened in the case of Jonah."¹⁶ But how much better it would have been for Jonah had he softened his heart to God's gracious will. In that case, he could have been on the deck instead of descending

¹⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 37.

¹⁵ Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in Compassion*, 26-27.

¹⁶ Kendall, *Jonah*, 57.

through the cold sea as the converted sailors began worshiping on the ship. How much better for us, too, to accept God's sovereign call on our lives, serving the cause of the gospel wherever God sends us and marveling at the grace by which we and others are saved.

But Jonah's experience holds a message for those who have not yet believed, too. Learn from the grace that God extended to the sailors. James Boice writes: "You have not yet perished in your godless state because God, who made the sea around you and the dry land on which you walk, preserves you. Do not remain indifferent to him. Turn to him. Approach him on the basis of the perfect sacrifice for sin made once by his own Son, Jesus Christ, and follow him throughout your days."¹⁷

¹⁷ Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 1:280.