

Reading: Jonah 1

Theme: Ascending and Descending.

Things had turned sour for Jonah, even though he had thought things were going well and his great escape plan was working - as he went the opposite direction to Nineveh, safely on board a boat and heading to Tarshish. He would learn that the Lord and His commission could not be evaded, abandoned, ignored or disobeyed. The Lord had put His finger on him by the storm, the fear of the sailors, the pagan captain's rebuke and being identified as the one responsible for the storm in the casting of the lots by the sailors.

This led to the *confusion of the sailors* as he told them who he was and what he had done. We noted the *challenge of Jonah* to our lives - if he, as someone who knew God, His calling, power, grace, caring and help, could ignore God's word to him and be stubbornly defiant, then it is a challenge to us. Even though he had told the sailors who he was, what he had done, this did not seem to be true repentance, but a telling of the facts and not a confession. The sailors on hearing Jonah's words were even more afraid, yet he remained stubbornly defiant. I want to focus on 2 things this evening:

1. Ascending in fear to salvation.

We see the fear, its progression and its outworking in the sailors. In v5 as they were struck by the storm, they are afraid - *a fear out of ignorance*. In it they prayed to their gods and did as they had in other serious storms they encountered - cargo was thrown overboard to make the ship lighter, more able to ride out the storm. As Jonah was identified as the cause of the storm by the casting of the lot, as they are told who it

was that sent the storm and why - their fear rises and we are told (v10) they were terrified (NIV), or exceedingly afraid (AV). Now their fear is not out of ignorance, but now was *a fear out of knowledge* - they knew that the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land, had sent this storm and no local deity or god, but the universal God, the God of gods was the One they had to do with - and they were terrified

This God is still not a cosy, domesticated deity, who we can call into or keep out of our lives as we desire and wish. He is not tamely there for only the convenient help, care, safety and comfort we want at times, but we do not let Him affect our lives and behaviour as He could so readily do if we treated Him seriously. This can be true of professing Christians as well as those who have no time for God in their day by day lives. For many people it is as if God is in a glass case or at the end of an emergency helpline - we break the glass or desperately call Him to get His help in times of trouble or emergency!

We are to realise this God is the Lord, the sovereign God over all Creation, over our little lives and their events. He is not a safe God; in fact, He is positively and awesomely dangerous! He cannot be tamed, He is not at our beck and call, nor can He be used, manipulated, abused or ignored according to our whims or needs. He is the One that will terrify us as we learn about Him; for we learn He has such high standards that we cannot even grasp them, let alone meet them. We call this His holiness and yet His utter holiness of Being means He has to correctly, justly punish any shortcomings of His perfection and holiness on those in whom He finds such. Yet His justice

is not a flash in the pan justice and then He calms down, for His holiness means our missings the target of His holiness are an eternal offence against Him and He fully maintains and continues His just punishment for all eternity on those who have offended Him. That is a reason why this God is to be feared!

Tragically we can do nothing to make ourselves right or acceptable with this God. We are in a hopeless state as we cannot improve ourselves enough to get rid of any past shortcomings. Even if we feel we could, then that would offend Him because we'd magnify our efforts and minimise His holiness. Left to ourselves we are helpless, hopeless and yet God has made a way, only one way for us to be right with Him. Sadly, people feel they want to do it themselves and ignore, overlook or reject God's only way. They can even, although aware of this way, just get on and do things as they think will be fine. This doubles their guilt as they know of God, what He is like, of the way He has provided and yet they do not accept or make use of His way provided!

We, like the sailors need to fear God, not out of an ignorant and superstitious fear, but know of Him and what He is like in an informed way. Doing this should, as it did the sailors, affect our lives and attitudes. We see that their informed fear caused them to do good even to the one who had brought this storm on them. Being aware of the Lord affected their attitude and behaviour and they did all they could to preserve Jonah and their lives. They did this even when Jonah told them what to do to stop the storm. Amazingly, when they realise that they had to throw Jonah overboard, they called on the Lord (v14)

- for they knew they were not to mess with the Lord. The sailors in calling on the Lord did what the Lord wanted, which Jonah would not do! We have to wonder who the pagan was at this point in the story! Jonah was still not praying to the Lord, but the sailors were! When Jonah was thrown into the sea, it grew calm, the sailors greatly, exceedingly feared the Lord and they offered sacrifices and made vows. Their ignorant fear had ascended into informed fear and now it is *a submissive fear* and the One they prayed to, the subject of their prayers, sacrifices and vows now changed.

It is interesting they made the sacrifices and vows **not to stop** the storm, as many try to do in their desperate times, for their sacrifices and vows occur after the storm had ceased and they were safe. Now they knew that the Lord He was God and it may be they came to faith in Him. Their vows were probably ones of faith and to offer sacrifices to Him. If that is the case, it will be amazing to get their testimonies in heaven! Grace was shown to them in the storm and incredibly God used Jonah's disobedience in the conversion of these men! Although that does not justify or excuse his disobedience, nor give us a reason to disobey God - saying God can work things out for good in the lives of others. Yet He can sovereignly do so!

The sailors had seen the power of God as Creator. Do we recognise the power of God as Creator and Sustainer of all? God's power and divine nature can be seen from Creation and all around us. Yet a greater power is shown in the gospel, which is the power of God to salvation. While we need to know and fear the awesome Creator God, yet we can only be

right with Him through all He has provided in the gospel of the Lord Jesus. This is a work of sovereign grace which no one deserves and it took the almighty wisdom, love and power of God to plan it and to bring it about so we can be rescued from the storm of His just anger and judgement ahead - which waits for us all if we do not go to the Lord Jesus as our Saviour.

2. Descending in defiance to punishment.

Here we turn our attention to Jonah whose defiance has been getting progressively more stubborn. In v12 we see of his ultimate defiance as he would rather die than obey God! It does not seem to be motivated by realising he deserved to die for such sinful defiance; nor motivated by sacrificing himself to save the sailors - even though they did all they could to save his life, but it seems to be motivated by the *ultimate defiance* of not wanting to do God's will for his life! He could have owned his guilt; said he would go to Nineveh, had the boat turned around. If he had, I wonder if the storm would have ceased and even favourable winds would have taken them back to shore. Yet Jonah did none of this.

Here is his ultimate defiance - he would rather die than do as God had commissioned him. He still clung to his reasons, possibly feeling that if he went to Nineveh and they repented, then they would be spared and God would use them to punish and destroy Israel. Perhaps he was setting himself up as a hero, the one to rescue and deliver Israel and probably reckoned that it would be better for one man to die so that the nation would be spared. It is possible he might have felt he was more compassionate than God and would rather die than

obey! Just contrast Jonah with the One he ironically foreshadowed - the Lord Jesus, who would rather obey God than live! Jonah wrongly assumed he could save Israel by his death in the storm and yet Jesus truly saved His people by taking the storm of God's wrath and judgement on himself in the place of guilty ones so they could be spared for ever.

Jonah's unrepentant defiance was not neutral - it put him on a course of self-destruction and the sea grew wilder (v13). Even though the sailors rowed and did their best, it was of no use. How ironic that these men did all they could to save Jonah and he did nothing to save them! I find it quite amazing how some non-Christians out-Christian Christians and that should be a rebuke to us as God's people. We are to realise God is not limited to using only us. He can raise up others to do the work we should do.

Thankfully God can make the wrath and disobedience of man praise Him and here he uses Jonah's disobedience in the conversion of these pagan sailors to Himself. Jonah found God was sovereignly working to save pagans even though he was disobedient and defiant - for no one can defy the sovereign purposes of God. I wonder if anyone of us is trying to do that. Sadly, there can be strands of defiance in our lives and none of us are immune from it. We can have secret sin, lust, desires, wanting to run away from a situation, holding onto a resentment or bitterness; even refusing to obey God's clear command or clear leading. Such things can be possible in our lives even as Christians. We are to realise as God's child, that the Lord can use whatever, whoever He chooses to bring us back to the path of obedience we should be walking

in. It may not necessarily be a storm hurled, but through the prod of our conscience by His word, or a word from a brother or sister, yes even through a "*storm*" sent into our lives. The most worrying and frightening thing is when God seems to do nothing - yes it may be that He, in His grace, is giving us time to repent. Or maybe He is doing nothing because we are not His child despite all our claims (Hebrews 12:8ff). In such a case He can be letting us go on in our life until the day we have to meet Him in eternity.

Even though Jonah is defiant even to death, in the vain hope that Israel would be spared, yet God was going to extend His grace to the sailors and also surprisingly to Jonah. The sailors were persuaded, sure that the Lord was the God of heaven, of the sea and dry land. Why was this? The power of God was seen in the storm and in the fact that the raging sea was switched off the moment Jonah is thrown into it. This was a frightening thing and it filled them with awe. If we read through the OT, we will note that the Lord is portrayed as being the Lord over the sea, the raging waves, waters and rivers. We note He has complete control over the Red Sea, the River Jordan, over water in the desert and such things. Raging waters are often symbolically used as an expression of judgement, of condemnation and they frequently reflect the turbulent and rebellious nature of people in sin.

Here the Lord stills the storm, the wind and the waves as Jonah hits the water! In NT we read of Jesus and His disciples on the sea of Galilee and a great storm arose while Jesus slept on cushions in the back of the boat and the disciples had a great fear and they woke Jesus up - questioning if He cared,

did He know they were going to perish and Jesus stood up and said "*Peace be still*" and there was a great calm. Mark tells us about the disciples at that point (4:41) "*They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"*"

When the Son of God became a man and lived on earth, He displayed His power as He stilled the storm, as He changed water into wine, by bringing about large catches a fish, by walking on a stormy sea. He demonstrated He was the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. This is the awesome Saviour God has provided and we dare not defy, indeed cannot defy Him - unless we want to do so to our own peril. Yet in wrath God would remember mercy - as we will see with Jonah.

We are not to presume on God's mercy and go against His will thinking all will be fine. If we are not a Christian, then I pray we will be like the sailors and learn to fear the Lord in a right way and our ignorant fear becomes informed fear, then becomes submissive fear as we trust ourself and our eternal soul to the Lord Jesus as our Saviour.

We who are believers, I pray we will not to have stubborn defiance in any area of our lives, but we will walk with our God in obedience, trust and do what pleases Him in all things and at all times in our lives and He will use us to live for Him and we see many brought to know Him as their Saviour because of our lives and words.