

Reading: Jonah 1

Theme: The Finger of God!

Jonah was on the run, out of Israel, out from the presence of the Lord -meaning he was resigning his calling and service as a prophet of the Lord; leaving the commission he had from the God of the whole earth. Jonah's great escape plan was, to him, working very well as the Lord had not interfered to stop his headlong folly and flight. He was safely on a ship headed west to Tarshish (Southern Spain). After all the frantic activity of the past few days, Jonah headed to his cabin – well below deck and for a good sleep – all the time he was heading further and further away from Nineveh. Possibly as he dozed off, he thought he had done it - escaped!

God had other plans for Jonah and Jonah could not ruin God's loving plans and purposes for Nineveh or himself! All Jonah did was going to be exposed as utterly useless and futile. I wonder how many people think they can do as they please and God will never do anything about them and their lives. People throw themselves into lifestyles, into sin, into things that are harmful and indulge themselves as they want and think it does not matter to God. They want all the comfort and pleasure they can, no matter what it is and yet they fail to realise it is only a temporary comfort and pleasure! The Bible warns us all in Numbers 32v23 "*be sure your sin will find you out.*" (AV) "*you may be sure that your sin will find you out.*" (NIV) People will keep on running away from God for years as they indulge in sin, wrong things – some openly, some secretly and yet nothing seems to happen from God! Yet one day...!

We are to realise God can afford to wait. People, perhaps someone watching or listening online, may be going against

God and His ways; you are apparently unpunished, as if God hasn't noticed or doesn't know about you and your life! Yet He does! Our lives, desires, actions, words and thoughts are fully and clearly known to God in minute detail. At a time of God's choosing, He can be there to meet us and confront us with His justice or amazingly even His grace and love. We may like the grace and love bit and hope that is for us, but the justice part – we do not like that at all! God is a just and holy God, He has to judge and punish wrong with a perfect, holy and just punishment. Many feel God shouldn't be like that, they do not like such thoughts and in doing so they do God a great injustice, for such ones may say God is not capable of such feelings as we are. When we hear of an atrocity or a case of abuse to an old person or a child, then surely, we want them to be caught and punished, for justice to be served or retribution happen? Yet we may say or feel that the infinitely holy God, who is perfect and sees all that happens, shouldn't be bothered with our crimes and rebellion against Him and we distort, mutilate God to a thing for our own convenience, who must dance to our changing whims, standards, morals and values.

Thankfully God doesn't deal with us as we deserve, but deals with us all in grace and goodness. If He dealt with us in justice none of us would last long and we would never know any good or pleasant thing in our lives. We are to realise that God's judgement is not something reserved for sometime in the future – yes there will be the great and final Day of Judgement, but in our here and now time and lives He is working His judgements out as He knows is right and best in all the earth. God especially deals with those who profess to know Him and who wander away from Him and into sin; for He has a special love for them and He will correct, chastise, discipline His children because of

the great love He has for them. This is what we see here with Jonah in the storm. Not all storms in our lives are discipline, chastisements, corrections, nor are we necessarily being punished - such can be part of the bundle of life in a fallen world or be even as the storm that Paul had at sea - which was for a totally different purpose and we need wisdom to understand what are God's purposes in our life's storms and trials. Here in v4-6 we will see the finger of God on Jonah in 3 ways (noting only 2 this evening!):

1. In the Storm. (v4)

The weather announcer of the day would have said a fierce storm occurred and that force 11 or 12 winds happened, but we see here there was a supernatural source to the storm "*the Lord sent a great wind*" literally "*hurled a great wind*" - just like a spearman taking aim and hurling his spear, so God aimed and hurled the wind and storm at the centre the of the target - Jonah. As it happened things started to go wrong for Jonah's escape plan, as God, controlling the wind and the storm, hurled it at Jonah's vessel. We are often told in the Bible of God's control over the elements – the winds, rain, clouds, storms, lightning, thunder, hail, snow, even the waves and sea. We see clearly that this ship was hit by a storm from the Lord as God sent it forth and controlled the winds and waves from first to last – see v15.

"Hold on" says someone, *"Doesn't that mean God allowed others to suffer, who were innocent of God's controversy with Jonah? Isn't God unfair and unjust? What about all the innocent people who have suffered in recent disasters, cyclones, tsunamis and floods?"* Let's just take a short time to briefly revisit and consider this question of "natural" disasters and the suffering of innocent people.

If we leave God out of the picture and assume there is nothing but natural forces – Mother Nature, then we see these disasters are but a working out of the natural system that would have one day happened due to winds, tides, earthquakes etc. There is no reason to it, for it just happens and people are the victims of freak and random conditions – but then that is evolution - all happens by random chance and the strongest, fittest or luckiest survive. It may sound harsh and cruel, but ignoring God, that is what we are left with - evolution is surviving the cold chance of disaster and circumstances.

Putting God in the picture may not seem to add much! The natural world around us shows there is a God who created and designed it all (Psalm 19:1). It seems He didn't do a great job as we look around us, hear and see the news. We are told that God created all perfect – no earthquakes, cyclones, storms, volcanoes etc. Sadly God's perfect world was spoiled, the beautiful order and balance of nature was upset by a most awful thing called sin. It happened when Adam and Eve went against what God said and it caused suffering and death to come in, also 'natural' phenomena that cause so much devastation - for the whole Creation groans under the curse sin brought on it from God. Since then, no man, woman or child is innocent before God - we are all guilty before Him and deserve no good thing from Him. Even when we get good things, we misuse them. When God allows seeming disasters it is not without reasons and it is not on "innocent" people, but ones who are guilty and responsible before Him. That does not mean we can see or understand reasons for such events, but realise they could have happened to us, as we deserve it as much as others did. God

speaks to us in all the events of life, but in the disasters He SHOUTS at us. Are we taking note and listening?

Others may have suffered in this storm along with Jonah, but God was not unjustly treating them as they too may have deserved it or worse, but our focus is on His purpose to specifically deal with His runaway fugitive prophet. For Jonah and even the sailors, this storm was to serve His purposes of love and grace... It should be a solemn thought that we can involve others in a calamity. If we resist God when He has been speaking to us through His word, or He has been calling us to trust the Lord Jesus, then we are to realise He can choose to send storms into our lives that could affect not only us, but our families, loved ones, friends... Perhaps as a believer in the Lord Jesus we can be rebelling and running away from God and what He wants us to do and this can affect our church – one Achan caused a battle to be lost by Israel (Joshua 7). It is so important that we as individual believers maintain a right walk with the Lord and His people and not let the devil get a foothold in the church through our life - for much blessing could be lost.

If we are trying to run from the Lord as a Christian or as someone who is being challenged by God, then wise up and note the warning that God knows where you are, what you are at; He has you in His sights and knows when He will strike to deal with you. Learn from Jonah; stop running; get right with God before He puts His finger on your life and situation by sending a great wind and storm. The finger of God was in the storm, but it was also:

2. In the Fear of the Sailors. (v5)

Sailors are not known for being timid and frightened men, but here in the storm they were struck with fear and terror. They were afraid for their lives because of the storm God sent, which came with such a force that it struck terror into their hearts. I wonder what is our greatest nightmare or terror! People have fears about spiders, snakes, worms, dogs, heights, open spaces, some about growing old, or losing their beauty and looks, or losing their life partner and so we could go on. The Bible says we are to fear God, especially meeting Him as our Judge. This is where the great terror of death crouches sub-consciously or even consciously and people fear there is a life after death and they are not prepared to meet God. Are we prepared to meet God?

The fear of the sailors shows the finger of God going after Jonah – as we see their initial reaction was that “*each cried out to his own god*”. They knew there was a God, they each had differing gods and so they called out hoping that one of them would hear and help them. As the storm burst unexpectedly upon them, they desperately prayed. They were at an end of themselves; they all called out to their tribal, national deities. We do not know when or how often they prayed before this! Yet as this storm, this crisis came upon them, they prayed and sought help from their gods.

What about us? Do we only pray and call out to God in desperation when we feel we can do nothing else? Most of our time we may not like to retain the knowledge of God in our mind as we feel He's too narrow, too demanding, but in a time of trouble it is “*God help me, us*”. Many have done and will do this; many whose lives are lived against God and what He wants, yet in a time of crisis they will call upon this unknown

and unwanted God to help them, indeed they expect, demand that He help them, for they feel that is His job! They may make great promises - of reform, of a change of life and place great trust in such prayers which they are forced to pray in terror and assume that these will have the appearance of true religion. Some say things they do not mean - 2 men adrift in a boat, one a godless, profane man and promised great changes; his friend said *"But you don't mean it do you?"* And his friend answered *"Not at all, but He doesn't know that!"* James Whitaker wrote *"There are no atheists in foxholes and rubber rafts"*.

Prayer is not there just as an SOS thing in a time of terror, but true prayer begins with knowing the forgiveness and love of God and you then call Him as your Father through the Lord Jesus. A Christian is someone who knows this and knows what it is to develop and build this relationship with Him at all times - in good times and in trials. We are to question how much value there is in cringing prayer, promising many things which conscience and superstitions demand we say. Such prayers can be quite valueless. God wants us to come and to seek Him for His forgiveness primarily, as well as seeking Him for any extension of our physical lives or well-being.

We again see God's finger being worked out in the sailors fear in that they not only prayed, but they threw their cargo out to lighten the ship. What was precious to them? Without doubt it was the cargo for without that they would make a loss, have no money, their standard of living would go down and even their standing in society would be affected. Yet in fear for their lives, they were willing to part with that, for their lives were more valuable to them than their cargo. The cargo was useless trifles compared to their lives. If they had had gold in abundance in the

hold, they would have thrown it overboard to save their lives. *"All that a man has he will give for his life"* (Job 2:4). Their lives were more precious to them than their cargo. Richard III dismounted and doomed on the battlefield of Bosworth was ready to exchange his kingdom for a horse, so that his life would be spared. How many would give up all they had for another hour of life?

Tonight, now, God offers us eternal life, it is there for the receiving and it is an amazing offer, but it means throwing overboard our pride that we can be good enough to be right with God through what we do - these have to be seen as surplus to requirements - for our religious feelings and practices are like useless, solid gold lifebelts and all our goodness and niceness are the same. Most of all we have to get rid of our sin, which is as radioactive gold weights. The Lord Jesus has to be in our life as our Saviour and there's no room for anyone or anything else to get us right with God.

This evening I wonder if God has started or is continuing to put His finger on the life of someone watching or listening, as things they have known for so long to be true may have been driven home, or things perhaps we have run away from for so long. Tonight I would urge us all to stop running, to make peace with God and know LIFE abundant through the Lord Jesus.

Next time we will cover, among other things the 3rd way in which the finger of God was on Jonah in **In the Rebuke of the Heathen Captain**. Amazing that God can use the most unlikely people to cause us to think of Him, our God is often the God of surprises!