

Reading: Jonah 1:7-17

Theme: From Confusion to Confusion!

People often imagine they can do wrong things and will never be found out, never be troubled by those things. Many have committed appalling crimes, escaped detection for years, feeling they have escaped and got off scot-free. Yet they may have pangs of guilt as the memories of their deeds arise. Criminals can be sought internationally and extradited to the country of their crimes and brought to justice many years later. It is easy to feel and assume evil is unpunished, but there is evidence that this is not always the case. Yes there are plenty of cases of injustice about, but often, even after years, justice is seen to be done.

Jonah seemed to have got off scot-free as he tried to get away from the presence of the Lord, on his way to Tarshish, but God put his finger upon Jonah. There was no way he could avoid knowing it was none other than God calling him to account as he was caught and cornered by God. Very often when we seek to run away from God by our disobedience, ignoring His word, by neglecting His call to follow Him or obey Him as our Saviour, He can corner us and we have no way out, have to own up to our failure, confess our sin and obey Him – which is not a pleasant experience. Our complacency, self-confidence and illusionary peace evaporate as we are confronted by God.

As Jonah was woken from his deep sleep, it may have dawned on him very quickly that he was responsible for bringing the storm upon the ship; he also felt he couldn't pray to the Lord God of heaven and earth who had sent it. I want to see 3 things from v7-10:

1. The confusion of the sailors. (v7-8)

The captain and the sailors were confused. They may never have known such a storm. Yes, they had been through storms, yet had seen them developing, but this storm was different. Perhaps something about it was unusual as if it targeted them and it caused in them a growing anxiety and fear. It must have been dreadful as these men came to realise this was a storm of judgement, of vengeance and they questioned who was responsible for that calamity. Their fear had been growing and at this point confusion reigned. They could not understand it, for they had called in desperation on their gods and nothing had happened. Each considered themselves as innocent and whoever was responsible was not going to own up and they resorted to the casting of lots to show them who was the guilty party. We are not told how exactly they did this - names in a hat, short straw drawn etc, but the lot fell on Jonah.

Jonah was in the spotlight, thrust to the forefront - this landlubber passenger, a nonentity in terms of the boat, is now the centre of everyone's attention. God had directed the lot and it had shown Jonah to be the cause, the reason for this storm. The other gods were useless, but the living God had directed not only the storm, but even the casting of the lot – as we read in Proverbs 16:33 *"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD."* God used this heathen superstitious practice to expose Jonah and to bring him to public view - for God was sovereign and He controlled even the casting of the lot and through it Jonah is placed on *"trial"* (v8). Perhaps we are running from God, running into or have secret sin in our life, but we are to be warned that unless we flee and repent of our sin, that *"you may be sure that your sin will find you out."* (Numbers 32:23) This may or may not happen in our lifetimes, but we can be sure all our sin will be known and will certainly confront us after death; will be used in evidence against

us in our prosecution on the Day of Judgement if we do not believe on Jesus as our Saviour.

Sadly, we can all be like the sailors - thinking, assuming we are innocent before God because we have never done anything really bad. We know we're not murderers or great thieves or immoral; but, as we have seen, the sailors were not innocent before God and neither are we! All of us come short of God's standard and glory. We may admit we are far from perfect, but we fail to realise our lack of perfection deserves God's punishment. He does not give us what we deserve in our lives, yet so often when a great illness or disaster comes, people question God as if they deserve only His blessing, when in fact we deserve all we get and even deserve worse. The sailors and Jonah were confused, but Jonah's confusion would make him speak of his God again:

2. The challenge of Jonah. (v9)

As Jonah was questioned, so he was also challenged, confronted as to what he would say. His response is shown in v9. In it we do well to note what he does and doesn't say! It may seem like a confession, but it is not a confession of repentance or faith. It is forced, dragged from Jonah, with no repentance indicated and no remorse or sorrow included in it. The defiant, runaway prophet seems to be in open defiance now. He did not want to go to tell the pagans of the Lord and yet in spite of himself, he is used to introduce the true God to the pagans on board the ship! Jonah had been questioned by the sailors and he gave his answer (v9), with an added bit of information - which would have been the first thing he told them (v10). This is a literary style used by the Hebrews, but I'm not going to speak on Hebrew literary styles!

Jonah did make a full statement of what he was doing, who he was and his answer clearly left the sailors in no doubt it was because

of him the storm had come and they couldn't quite believe it! Here Jonah was forced to speak of his God, his people and his guilty action of running away from his God's service, yet his statements seem empty, hollow and matter of fact, with no emotion or sorrow. It is not a confession of faith to the glory of God, but just a cold owning of the facts of how things were. Jonah spoke of his God. He intimates that his God was not useless and powerless like the gods of the sailors! Jonah goes further than that by using the covenant name of his God - the LORD - perhaps some of them had heard of Him and what He was like and had done. Jonah added that his God was the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land. Now the poor frightened sailors were confronted with the universal God who controlled everything. Whereas before they been concerned that they had offended some local god or deity, now they are confronted with the God of heaven, Maker of the sea and the land, the One who is the God of gods. If they had been afraid before, but now they knew they had every reason to be terrified (v10)!

Here we have the challenge of Jonah's words and reaction, for on first reading we can take it that he has confessed his guilt, but in thinking about it and looking at it, this is not the case! It is incredible that a prophet of God, one who had known the Lord in amazing ways, that he could not only want to actively disobey his God, but try and run away out of His service. Even when pagan sailors can see that someone is responsible for making all this trouble for them and Jonah is fingered by the storm, by the fear of the sailors, the rebuke of the pagan captain, now even exposed by the casting of lots, yet he carried on in his stubborn and open defiance of **this God**. Jonah does not own his guilt here. This is not his repentance or his confession of his guilt. While the pagan sailors had prayed to their gods, Jonah had been rebuked for not praying; when the sailors prayed for forgiveness in throwing

Jonah overboard and even offered sacrifices and made vows to the Lord after the sea had gone calm, yet Jonah still did not pray until he had sunk, literally, lower and only in the belly of the fish do we read he prayed to the Lord his God (2:1).

The challenge of Jonah for us is that we could see our need to be right with God, to be at peace with Him - for we know that God Almighty sees and knows our every word and thought. We can even acknowledge that He knows our sin and wrong doing. At one time the things we did may have seemed as nothing to us, but we began to understand and realise that we did these things not against people, but against the Lord God of heaven, the Maker of the sea and earth and He is the holy and pure God and we don't do those things at a distance, but in His very presence. Yet we may be like Jonah and remain stubbornly defiant against this God - even though we know what is what regarding our lives and this God. We may consider someone foolish who goes out in a huge thunderstorm, especially if they went to the top of a high building with a long metal pole in their hand; but realise they are not as foolish as anyone who continues to deliberately running away from or sinning against the God of heaven. Maybe we need to examine our lives and see how foolish we are in going against this God and what we know is true.

Jonah's defiance is compounded because he knows what God had been to him - he must have been convicted by his very words - he was a Hebrew and this refers not just with his nationality, but to the fact that he was true to the living God and knew His love, mercy and grace in his life. Yet even as he said it, it aggravated his guilt because he was still defiant against this God and he was actively rebelling and sinning against Him. Jonah's words must have cut like a knife into his own heart as he spoke them. David Wilkinson in the book "The Cross and Switchblade" wrote of his

work in New York and of one open air meeting's being interrupted by children jitterbugging. When he talked with them, they said they were paid to do it by a man and they pointed him out. This man turned out to be a former minister who had committed adultery and the preaching had upset, hurt him and he wanted it silenced. David Wilkinson was used to bring him back to the Lord.

The sin of the world around us is no light thing, but the sins and backslidings of Christians are worse. If believers go against God it is a most grievous thing, for we go against our knowledge of God, our experience of His love, the word of God, the training in godliness we have had and it aggravates our guilt and it spoils our relationship with our heavenly Father. Thankfully, because of His grace, it does not mean He has finished with us, but it means we do not enjoy our relationship with Him to its fullest degree. We are not to remain defiant as did Jonah, but we need to quickly confess our sin to be restored in our relationship with Him and in our enjoyment of it. As many have said: *"We are to keep short accounts with God."*

Jonah's defiance is further aggravated when he says he worshipped the Lord, or as AV says *"I fear the Lord"*. If he had truly feared the Lord he would have obeyed Him. He was not indifferent to God and knew he was in fact His servant, a prophet no less. I wonder what bitter taste those words caused in Jonah's heart and mouth as he said them. What an irony that a prophet of God owns his failure to heathen sailors and yet he didn't own it to the God who he said he feared! We need to be careful as believers that we do not take our privileges for granted and think that we're going to be OK all our days. Paul warns the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 10:12 *"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"* We like Jonah can have great privileges of knowledge and service, yet we could fall. Maybe we had the honour and

privilege of a Christian family and yet we can fall away from the things of God in stubborn defiance because we don't want to go God's way. We are to realise that those to whom much is given, much will be expected. As Jonah said these things it led to:

3. The consternation of the sailors. (v10)

The word consternation is just a posh way of saying confusion, but I've already used that heading! Consternation carries the sense of amazement or dismay that causes mental confusion, in other words they didn't believe it possible that something like that could be done. On hearing what Jonah said they became even more afraid and NIV says "terrified" and AV says "exceeding afraid". His words didn't cause them indifference or apathy, but it terrified them witless as they realise the wind and the waves were under the control of this God, and the shore, the rocks they feared crashing into were also created by Him. They did not sigh with relief that they were not to blame; nor did they heap insults upon Jonah. His words caused them consternation; this amazed confusion as they were confronted with the Lord, the truth about Him and it seems they saw their lives in relation to this God.

Perhaps they reckoned that if this Lord was angry with one of His own, even a prophet, a servant of His, who was running away from a great and difficult task, that if this God could send such a storm to punish him for such a thing, then what about their lives, their sin and ignorance of this God? Incredibly while Jonah remained defiant, it would seem that God was working in them and made them aware that He was pursuing them as well! They realised they were not innocent; in fact, they had done much more to offend this God and surely, He had much more against them!

Many people seem to get away with a lot of evil and yet a Christian can have one lapse and they seem to suffer the worse for it than

those who regularly and consistently go against God. Why? We need to remind ourselves of 1 Peter 4:17-18 *“For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”* As Christians we are to take heed and be warned by that, but unbelievers need to take more notice of it. Christians will be disciplined, punished as children and will not lose heaven, but unbelievers will lose everything and gain hell. We will see that the sailors turned towards the Lord when we come to v16. Will we turn to this God tonight - perhaps for the first time, or return to Him from a position of coldness and backsliding? God wants a true turning to Himself for the salvation which is offered in the Lord Jesus, a going to Him in true repentance and to walk with Him all our days. I pray that tonight we would all be at peace with God for the first time or know it restored again and we would walk in obedience in God’s ways.