

“We Are On This Ship Together”

Jonah 1: 5-10

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Ok... Quick review... The Lord has called the prophet Jonah, an Israelite, to go preach to the great wicked city of Nineveh. Jonah doesn't want to do that, so he decides to run away from God. He books passage on a ship that will take him in the opposite direction. But God will not let Jonah go so easily.

Jonah 1:4 The Lord threw a great wind onto the sea, and such a great storm arose on the sea that the ship threatened to break apart.

This is not a little squall. This is the Edmund Fitzgerald, maybe times three. That is where we left Jonah last Sunday and today we continue the story. In college we used to sing a song entitled, “We Sail a Ship with A Man Named Jonah.” Someone wrote the lyrics in 1964, though the tune is that of an old Irish shanty, “What Shall We Do with A Drunken Sailor?” Anyway, our focus today will be on those men sailing the ship with that man named Jonah, because the Lord has some important lessons for us through them. Let's pause and pray we would hear and heed His word today.

We have a ship out in the Mediterranean during a terrific storm.

Johan 1:5a The sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his god. They threw the ship's cargo into the sea to lighten the load.

They are no doubt experienced mariners. They realize death is a real possibility. They are religious to some degree. We don't know the ethnic or religious background of the crew, but they are not Israelites or worshippers of the one true God. They are pagans, but pagan who see some things more clearly than Jonah, the prophet of God, does.

Jonah 1:5b Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down to the lowest part of the vessel and had stretched out and fallen into a deep sleep.

Jonah is oblivious to the danger everyone on the ship is facing. How he was able to sleep as the storm is raging? Some Bible scholars speculate that because he was a prophet of God, running away from God, Jonah's deep sleep is rooted in depression. The storm doesn't keep him awake, because Jonah doesn't care whether he lives or dies. Any reflection on Jonah's part, will confirm he has made a huge mistake running from God.

Jonan 1:6 The captain approached him and said, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up! Call to your god. Maybe this god will consider us, and we won't perish.”

The text does not provide any response from Jonah to what the man says, which leaves an incredible contrast. The pagan captain is urging Jonah to pray. He expresses a belief that Jonah's god might be able to rescue them. The prophet of God, Jonah, however, apparently does not pray and not express any hope that the god he believes in will save them. So even though the Lord had commissioned Jonah to point pagans to God, it is now pagans who point Jonah to the Lord. That is certainly ironic. The text then makes a quick transition from the captain to the rest of the sailors.

Jonah 1:7 “Come on!” The sailors said to each other. “Let's cast lots. Then we'll know who is to blame for this trouble we're in.” So they cast lots, and the lot singled out Jonah.

Casting lots is one of the practices of the ancient world mentioned in the Bible which modern Christians find a little confusing. In the New Testament, the Apostles cast lots to determine who would replace Judas in their circle.

Acts 1:26b says The lot fell to Matthias, so he was added to the eleven apostles.

In Jonah's case, it seems a small stick or stone was assigned to represent each person on the ship, the entire crew plus Jonah. They were tossed and the one which landed closest to a particular object or location was considered the lot that was chosen. So the stick or stone assigned to Jonah is the winner, or in this case the loser. In the Bible casting lots is not considered a random way to make a choice.

Proverbs 16:33 says The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Or as the New Living Translation puts it...

Proverbs 16:33 We may throw the dice, but the Lord determines how they fall.

Now I am not suggesting we cast lots or roll dice to make decisions. Yet, God's sovereignty does extend to these minute details of life. And it is okay to keep that in mind the next time you are losing in a Yahtzee game. In this case, the Lord uses the lot to show Jonah is the one responsible for the storm.

Yet, even as the lot points to Jonah, the pagan sailors are not quick to condemn him. Rather than throw him overboard they ask questions.

Jonah 1:8 Then they said to him, “Tell us who is to blame for this trouble we’re in. What is your business, and where are you from? What is your country, and what people are you from?”

And then, finally, Jonah speaks.

Jonah 1:9 He answered them, “I’m a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of the heavens, who made the sea and the dry land.”

It is interesting that Jonah first mentions, his ethnicity then his religion. But we finally have an indication that Jonah has not completely abandoned his faith.

Jonah 1:10 Then the men were seized by a great fear and said to him, “What have you done?” The men knew he was fleeing from the Lord’s presence because he had told them.

So, he told them he believed in the God who made the sea and land, and he let them know he was trying to run away from this God. The sailors are putting the pieces of the puzzle together. The reason this category 5+ storm has hit is because of Jonah’s disobedience to his God.

Jonah 1:11, 12 So they said to him, “What should we do to you so that the sea will calm down for us?” For the sea was getting worse and worse. He answered them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea so that it will calm down for you, for I know that I’m to blame for this great storm that is against you.”

Jonah is finally taking responsibility for what is happening.

Jonah 1:13,14 But they couldn’t because the sea was raging against them more and more. So they called out to the Lord, “Please, Lord, don’t let us perish because of this man’s life, and don’t charge us with innocent blood! For you, Lord, have done just as you please.”

These pagan sailors are now calling out to the Lord.

Jonah 1:15, 16 Then they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped raging. The men were seized by great fear of the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Their theological understanding is probably very minimal. I am not sure what their motives for sacrifices and vows were. I don’t know if they were worshippers of the true God, but they are certainly moving in the right direction.

Okay, that is our text. Next Sunday we will focus on some of the things we learn from Jonah in this passage, but today we want to explore a couple of lessons we learn from the pagan sailors. The main storyline of this book is Jonah and the people of Nineveh. Yet, these fellows sailing with a man named Jonah and their interaction are an interesting and important side bar.

Lesson #1 Because of God’s common grace, pagans, non-believers, can be relatively good people. The sailors provide a contrast to the cruel Ninevehites. Remember their soldiers cut off the limbs of captured enemies, but left one arm so they could shake their hands. Nasty folks. The sailors seem very different. They appear genuinely concerned about Jonah’s welfare. Even after Jonah tells them to throw him overboard, they try to avoid doing so. And they show real respect to Jonah’s God, the true God. One bible commentary notes, *“In this episode hope, justice and integrity reside not with Jonah, but with the captain and the sailors. Finding themselves in a dangerous situation not of their making they seek to solve it for the good of all.”* If I would have lived 2700 years ago, I might have preferred one of these sailors rather than Jonah for a next door neighbor. Of course the sailor would probably be gone most of the time out at sea.

Common grace involves gifts or blessings God gives to all people, both believers and unbelievers. It includes, as Jesus says in **Matthew 5:45**, the rain, that falls on both the righteous and unrighteous. Now, to be clear, receiving common grace does not save anyone. Many who have been given a generous measure of common grace will still spend eternity in hell, because they have not experienced saving grace. Only God’s special grace received through faith in Jesus Christ brings salvation. All human beings receive God’s common grace to some degree, but only believers in Jesus have received His special, saving grace.

Keeping this in mind helps us answer a couple of questions that often come up. First, do really nice people need to become Christians? At times I hear something like this. My neighbors, Bob and Cindy, are the nicest people I know. They are so friendly and generous. And they always seem happy. No, they never go to church and I am not even sure they believe in God. It just seems weird that I would try to tell them about Jesus, because

they seem to be doing fine without Christianity. And nice people, like them, will surely get to go to heaven. Well, Bob and Cindy do need to hear about Jesus. Yes, God's common grace enables them to be nice people, but it will not get them into heaven. Only the Lord Jesus and do that. No matter how nice, successful, or happy people may seem, no matter how much of God's common grace they may have experienced, they still need Jesus.

But, question #2. Is God really please with good things that non-believers do? In one sense no, because motives matter. Even the most wonderful deed done, if not done for the glory of God, is not truly honoring to Him. However, when people apply the common grace they have received, it is honoring to the Lord. When the sailors on the ship showed compassion for Jonah, it honored the Lord. When non-Christian artists paint beautiful painters, when non-Christian farmers work hard and produce bountiful crops, when non-Christian scientists make discoveries that benefit people, God is, in some way, honored.

This is something to keep in mind as we interact with people around us who are not believers in Jesus. These days we often put people in "us and them" categories, including believers vs. non-believers. That is not necessarily wrong, because the bible does that.

For example: **1 John 3:10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child.**

So, yes, distinctions are very real and sometimes appropriate. However, there are qualities that all human beings share. These things are true of me and true of a pagan sailor from another country. They are true of the atheist, LGBT activist, who is teaching women's studies at the University of Minnesota, they are true of every human being. What are these qualities we all share? Number 1- we are all created in God's image. We all have value and dignity simple because of that. We are all part of one race, the human race.

In **Acts 17:26** the Apostle Paul says, **From one man God has made every nationality to live over the whole earth.** He also adds in verse 29, we are all God's "offspring." That is one thing we all have in common.

The second things we all have in common is we are all sinners. Many of you know these verses.

Romans 3:10 There is no one righteous, not even one.

And Romans 3:23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

In the original context Paul is talking both about Jews who have been entrusted with the word of God and pagans who have never seen a bible. All human beings, including all of us in this room are sinners. And that doesn't change because we are Christians. Yes, we have been regenerated, given life, but the spirit of God. Yes, we have been made new creatures in Christ. But, as Romans 7 makes very clear, we still struggle with a sinful nature or what we call indwelling sin. We are not all guilty of the same sins, but all of us believers and unbelievers, are in need of God's grace and forgiveness every single day.

Our text today reminds us that common grace sometimes enables unbelievers, despite their lack of faith, to sometimes act in a more Christian-like manner that Christians do. And sometimes Christians, because of our indwelling sin, do things which unbelievers find shameful. I would suggest we focus on threatening people as people, focusing on what we share in common, on one our differences. And if that individual is not a Christian, we need to encourage that person to turn to the Lord Jesus and trust in Him because they need His grace as much as you do. If that other person is a believer, encourage him/her to focus on honoring the Lord in each situation, because that is the responsibility of every Christian. Martin Luther said, if given a choice between a very competent physician who is a Muslim, and a not very competent physician who is a Christian, it is probably better to choose the Muslim. Common grace enables some Muslims to be better physicians than some Christians. Just like on that stormy sea, where some pagan sailors demonstrated more Godly attitude and actions than the prophet of God.

Number 2 - Because of common grace, we need to pay attention to what non-believers say. Remember, that conversation between the ship's captain and Jonah. The captain tells Jonah he needs to pray because his God may be able to save them. As I said, Jonah doesn't show much interest in praying and doesn't seem to have any confidence in the Lord. Sometimes non-believers speak truth that believers need to hear. Now, God can use anyone to communicate His word. He spoke through Balaam's donkey, who certainly

was not a believer. But, criticisms of the church made by unbelievers can have at least some validity. I suspect at least 90% of criticisms they make are inaccurate, but 1 out of 10 maybe hit the nail on the head. And I suspect half of the inaccurate criticisms contain some truth from which we might benefit. So, even if someone is wrong most of the time, it is still good to listen to them. The Apostle Paul tells us, as Christians **1 Corinthians 13:12a (NLT) Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror.**

We all have things to learn. The church may learn some things from non-Christian critics. You and I may learn some things from family members and friends who are not believers. Don't decide, "I am not going to listen to that person because she is not a Christian, and there is nothing I can learn from her." Friends, there may indeed be something you can learn.

One example of the church learning from its critics involves the so called "Televangelists." Now, our worship services have been broadcast on local cable for many years, and now they are available around the world through our You-Tube livestream. But I am not a televangelist. Jim Baker, Jimmy Swaggert, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn would be in that category. Not that many years ago a lot of Christians were excited about different preachers on TV and would say, "It's wonderful so many people can be reached with the gospel through these ministries." Of course, at least some of these guys spent more time asking for money than they did preaching, and the message they preached was often a gross distortion of the biblical gospel. Yet, it has usually been the world, not the church, that has pointed out the corruption and hypocrisy of some of these ministries. Whether it is sexual sin or owning multiple private jets, it has usually been unbelievers who have blown the whistle on these abuses. Now, the criticisms have not always been totally accurate or fair, but the criticisms have certainly been worth listening to.

Again, sometime criticisms can be inaccurate or wrong, but still worth hearing. The evangelical church has faced a lot of criticism for our refusal to recognize same sex marriages. Our critics are totally wrong on that point. God intends marriage to be the relationship between one man and one woman. However, the criticisms have caused many Christians, including me, to re-evaluate our

attitude to so called LGBT people, or people in the church who struggle with same sex attractions. These fold are sinner, just like I am, and I need to focus on sharing the good news of God's grace with them just like I would with anyone else.

Individual Christians can sometimes benefit from criticisms by family members and friends who are not believers. I remember one woman who was not a Christian, expressing great concerns because she felt her brother was abusing her children in the name of Christian discipline...not sparing the rod, and I think her concern was valid. Or I think of the man, not a believer, who was upset that his sister was spending so much time with church activities that she had no time to help care for their elderly mother. He may have understood the biblical priorities better than his sister. Friends, whenever we face criticism, from either unbelievers or fellow believers, our first responsibility is to listen, and see if there is truth in the criticism. If there is, the Lord expects us to, by His grace, seek to make corrections.

Friends, we might say the lesson from this portion of Jonah is that we are all on this boat together. Yes, there is a storm hitting. The virus, lockdowns, political division, and various other things make this a difficult time for our community and our nation. Because of God's common grace, folks who are not believers in Jesus Christ sometimes provide wisdom. We should be willing to listen to them. And then we need to pray they would be willing to listen to us. Because we have a message they need to hear. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only message that can really bring healing, hope and salvation to our broken lives and broken world. May the Lord give us wisdom, grace and courage to communicate well the message everyone needs to hear.