

“The Storms God Uses”

Jonah 1:4

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Twenty years ago, when our two oldest sons were pre-teens, they had a deep fascination with tornados. The movie “Twister” was a big hit at our house, and I think they both thought becoming a “storm chase” would be a good career. Now, hopping into a car and speeding to the nearest tornado never seemed like the safest occupation to me and I am not sure what type of paycheck there would be. However, there is something about violent storms such as tornados and hurricanes that capture the attention of many and cause an adrenalin rush for some. Yet, I don’t think a lot of people actually enjoy being in the midst of a severe storm, at least not many in their right mind. And that is true whether we are talking about hurricanes and tornados, or about the figurative storms that sometimes hit and disrupt our lives. Storms can be painful and terrifying. Yet, the Lord could use any of these events to accomplish His purpose in our lives, which always includes His glory and our ultimate good.

Folks, today our journey in the book of Jonah will not take us very far. We will focus on one verse, **Jonah 1:4**. If you have your bible you can turn there, otherwise it will be on the screen. I believe the Lord has important things to say to us in this one verse, so let’s pause and pray we would hear and heed them this morning.

God has call Jonah to go to the great, very pagan city of Nineveh and warn them of impending judgement. But he doesn’t want to go, so **Jonah 1:3 Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from the Lord’s presence. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the Lord’s presence.**

Jonah is trying to run from God. Yet as we noted last week, he cannot run from God and the Lord is not going to give up on Jonah so easily. **Jonah 1:4 But 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.**

The Hebrew word translated “threw” might be used for hurling a spear. It is clear the Lord is very intentionally directing this storm at Jonah. The word for “great” wind and storm is the same as the

“great” city of Nineveh. Jonah’s refusal to go to a great city puts him in the middle of a great storm, and the Lord will ultimately use this storm to get Jonah to where he should be. Okay, that is our text. It may not seem like there is a lot in that verse, but there are two important lessons on which I want to focus this morning. Now, I need to say I am indebted to Dr. Tim Keller for his commentary on Jonah. In it he highlights two important truths the bible teaches and that I have believed for a long time, however, they are truths I have not thought about much and have not preached about much over the year. So, I have not discovered any new truths, but we will explore some old truths that have been maybe neglected and remind ourselves how important they are.

Lesson number 1 – If you run from God, you *will* encounter a storm. Note I did not say you *might* encounter. You will encounter a storm. There are always consequences whenever we choose to disobey the Lord. This is actually a major theme in the Old Testament. Obedience to God brings blessings. Disobedience brings “curses,” or at least that is the word most often used. That is why the Proverbs say over and over, the wise person obeys the Lord, while the fool ignores God’s commands. That person is foolish because disobedience to God is self-destructive.

Now, we have to be careful here. As the book of Job teaches, no every storm that hits us is because we are trying to run from God. If something bad happened in your life, if you have difficulty, it is not necessarily because you did wrong or committed a sin. So, if this morning you are struggling with serious illness, or dealing with a rebellious child, or facing the loss of a job, I do not want you to start thinking, “Well, I guess God must be punishing me for something I did.” No, sometimes it is the sin of another person, not your sin, which causes a storm in your life. If someone smashes into your car as it is parked along the side of the street, you probably don’t need to be examining your life to figure out what sin you have committed. The person that hit you did something wrong, not you. In our world we often suffer because of the actions of others. And frequently we experience the consequences of a wrong act done long ago, specifically the sin of

Adam. When the rebellion against God occurred in the garden, the results of that sin impacted the entire created order. It is difficult to even imagine what it would be like to live in a world that was not ruined and broken by the fall. From Genesis 3 we do learn that if Adam and Eve had not sinned there would not be as many weeds in our gardens, and having a baby would be a less painful experience for women. Genesis 3 also indicates a natural tension between men and women in general, and husbands and wives in particular, is a result of living this fallen world.

So sometimes the storms of life, difficult things we experience, are caused directly by the sin of another person or persons. And sometimes, we continue to suffer because of sins committed long before we were ever born. Thus, the point is not that whenever you suffer it is because of sin or a lack of faith in your life. Rather, the point is that whenever you turn against the Lord, every time you sin, there are consequences. Sometimes, like in Johan's case, those consequences involve a direct discipline or punishment from God. However, much more frequently there are what might be called "natural consequences." For example, someone who is guilty of drunkenness and gluttony, what today we call abusing alcohol and overeating, often experience poor health. God doesn't usually throw lung cancer at a chain smoker, that is often the natural result of that addictive habit. **Proverbs 21** points to the natural consequences of being a violent person, "**The violence of the wicked sweeps them away because they refuse to act justly.**"

So, generally speaking liars are lied to, attackers are attacked, and he who lives by the sword dies by the sword. This natural result of sin is becoming increasingly evident when it come to sexual immorality. Unwanted pregnancy and venereal disease were often seen as the consequence of sexual sin. That can still be the case, but the emotional wounds people experience because of sexual promiscuity are causing a great deal of pain. When the biblical standards for sexual behavior are tossed aside, relationships often become abusive. God created us as beings that would live in fellowship with Him and harmony with others and the world around us. When we choose to rebel against God, our lives become square pegs being pushed into round holes. There is a lot of friction and tension. Nothing seems to fit like it should. Many of the

storms of life are simply the natural result of trying to live life a different way that God intends.

That is what is happening with Jonah. God threw a storm at Jonah and he immediately began to suffer because of his disobedience. Most of the time the consequences of sin take a lot more time to develop. They are usually more like the physical response you would have to a high dose of radiation. If that happens, you do not suddenly feel pain the moment you are exposed. It is not like a bullet or knife tearing into your body. You feel perfectly fine when exposed to that high dose of radiation, for a little while. But then, a little later, you start experiencing symptoms of radiation sickness, and by then it is usually too late. Or sin might be compared to cancer. You can have a malignant tumor in your body and not even be aware it is there. You don't feel sick at all, but that tumor is growing. And eventually the pain starts and if not treated that cancer will grow and grow until it kills you.

The analogy is this, sin, rebelling against God, probably won't bring a storm to your life immediately, but eventually it will. And it can destroy you. In fact, the Apostle Paul says, **Romans 6:23a For the wages of sin is death.** Physical and spiritual death. The latter is another phrase for eternal hell. Now, let's say you have a friend, Jeff. Not Joe, that is my friend. Anyway, Jeff has no use for the Lord. His life is all about himself. Though Jeff says he believes in God, he has never had time for Him. His focus is making more money, getting more things, and having more fun. To a large degree that is what he has been able to do. He has enjoyed good health over the years. He has a nice family and plenty of friends. Once in a while Jeff is trouble by the emptiness of his life and the shallowness of his relationships, but he has learned to live with that. However, there is a big storm on the horizon for Jeff. He doesn't see it, or pay attention to it, but it is like a huge hurricane. It is not just a category 5, but like a category 50 or maybe 500. Eventually Jeff is going to die, and after that comes God's judgement. **Hebrews 9:27 It is appointed for man to die once, and after that judgement.** Unless Jeff turn to Jesus Christ and puts his trust in Him, this will mean eternal hell. An unending experience of God's wrath. That will be the consequences of Jeff's sin. When will that gigantic storm hit? We are not sure. Jeff is 58 years old, so probably about 25 years from now. It

could be longer, maybe 40 years. It could be sooner, much sooner. Maybe tomorrow. What we do know is that one day the storm will hit, and if Jeff has not turned to the Lord Jesus, it will be too late.

Folks, as I think about Jeff, I suspect one of the best things that could happen to him would be if a storm hit his life and shook up his complacency. Maybe just a little storm would cause him to reconsider what really matters in life. A health scare might do it. He doesn't even have to get sick, just the doctor saying, "We are going to have to do a biopsy because I don't like the way that spot on your lung looks," might wake him up. It might cause him to think about things with some eternal significance. It might even, by God's grace, cause him to turn to the Lord for salvation.

And this points us to the second lesson, the Lord uses the storms of life to get us to where we should be. As we go through the book of Jonah we will see that God used that storm to get him to Nineveh. In fact, the only storm that does not have a redemptive purpose is that great final storm of God's wrath. Once that person is experiencing eternal hell, it is over. Oh God is still in some way glorified as he executes His judgement, but the ultimate good of that dinner is lost. But, besides that, God always uses storms to get us where we should be. It doesn't really matter what the particular storm is. He can use any type of trial, trouble or tragedy to accomplish His purposes. It doesn't really matter if the storm is because of our own sin or because of someone else's, including Adam's. God uses them all in our lives.

Maybe the clearest example of this in the Bible is Joseph in the Old Testament book of Genesis. He, a son of Jacob with 11 brothers, goes through some difficult storms. First, his jealous brothers sell him as a slave. Working as a slave in Egypt he is falsely accused of rape and thrown into prison. There, he helps one of the Pharaoh's servants, the Chief Cup Bearer. That man is released and forgets all about Joseph until just the right time. Then the storms of Joseph's life, which lasted about 15 years, start to bear their fruit. Because of the Cup Bearer's recommendation, Joseph is released from prison. He begins to serve the Pharaoh's court and is soon the Prime Minister of Egypt. In that position, he keeps his family from starving to death when a famine hits. Eventually,

looking back at life, he tells those brothers who had sold him as a slave, **Genesis 50:20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.**

Here are a couple contemporary examples of how God uses storms of difficulties in life to get us where we need to be. We already mentioned Jeff and his health scare. It took a couple of biopsies, but the doctors finally determined there was no cancer. But that whole experience really shook Jeff up. For the last month he has been going to church with his wife, and has been paying attention to the sermons. He is starting to think that maybe he does need God, especially as he has become aware of his mortality. The Lord is using that little storm in Jeff's life to get him closer to where he needs to be. Because, folks, we must always remember, the biggest need, the real need, of anyone who is not a believer is Jesus, is that he or she will come to faith, and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

When a storm hits, no matter how big or little it is, it is always a reminder of God's judgement against sin. No matter who is responsible for the sin, this fallen world points to a need for redemption and a redeemer. Will God throw a storm at an unbeliever, cause trouble or tragedy in that person's life? Perhaps. But that may be an act of mercy. Friends, if you have a brain tumor, it is a very good thing to know you have a brain tumor. Until you realize you have a problem, you are not going to do anything to combat that problem. If a trial or tragedy causes an unbeliever to recognize his or her need for the Lord, it is a good thing. "But, Pastor Dan, don't trials and tragedies, the storms of life, turn people against God?" Yes, sometimes people blame God for the storms they face in life. They maybe angry at God. Yet, often someone who is angry at God, is closer to faith than a person who is indifferent or too busy with other things to think about God. Remember what C.S. Lewis said, "God whispers to us in our pleasure, and shouts to us in our pain." When a storm hits, when a trial or tragedy disrupts life for someone who is not a believer in the Lord Jesus, God is shouting to that person. He is saying, "It is time to turn to me! It is time to stop trusting in yourself, and place your faith in Jesus Christ."

The second example is Diane. It has been 16 months since her husband, Jay, walked out the

door for the last time. He now lives in Colorado with another woman he had met online. Initially, Diane was devastated, she wondered, how could God let this happen? She had always tried to be a good wife. Yes, she believed the Lord would provide for her needs, but 18 months ago she did not see how that would happen. Now, as she looks back, her eyes again fill with tears. Yet, now those tears are mostly because of gratitude for the grace of God. Oh, things have not been easy, but the Lord has provided. And her faith in Christ has grown so much during the past year. After about six months of feeling sorry for herself, Diane decided it was time to move ahead in life. That included taking time to read her bible and pray every day. She joined a wonderful bible study with five other gals that has been meeting each week, sometimes in person, sometimes on Zoom. These women have encouraged each other not to get bogged down in circumstances, but to focus on knowing, trusting and serving the Lord. Diane realizes that even though she has been a Christian for years, she really had been relying more on Jay than on Jesus. Yes, it would be nice to maybe get married again someday, but now she realizes whether she is married or single, whether the circumstances of her life are easy or difficult, her hope, the only one worthy of her confidence is Jesus. He is truly her only hope in life or death. Is Diane glad Jay left 18 months ago? Not at all. But she is very glad that this horrible storm has brought her so much closer to the Lord Jesus.

Friends, as believers in Jesus, there are many different types of storms that hit our lives. There are many different reasons why God allows those storms. Sometimes it is our sin, sometimes it is the sin of others, sometimes it is the sin of Adam that causes a particular trial or tragedy in our lives. Yet, God desires to use every storm, no matter how big or small for His glory and our ultimate good. He says that in **Romans 8:28** **And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.** Yes, that all things includes times when the sailing though life is smooth, as well as when the storms hit. Yet, the bible indicates there are important lessons we learn best in difficult times. Actor Chad Boseman died in August. He spoke an important truth when he said this, "Sometimes you need to feel the pain and sting of defeat to activate the real passion and purpose that God has planned for you." Folks, that is true. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says

in Romans 5:3-5 We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His love.

Friends, I don't know what storm you are going through, or have gone through, or will go through in the future. I don't know if God will throw a storm at you to get your attention, or if your storm will be because someone sins against you. My exhortation to you is don't waste that storm. God wants to use it to get you where you need to be. That doesn't necessarily make it easy to go through trials or tragedies, but it does mean that you can be confident that God has not forgotten you and He intends to use these things for His glory and your ultimate good.