

Man Overboard

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Of course most of us are familiar with swashbuckler films—think Errol Flynn as Capt. Blood or Johnny Depp as Capt. Jack Sparrow. As American moviegoers, we’ve come to expect certain things in these narratives. We expect treasure maps and hook-handed pirates and eyepatches aplenty and, of course, an *ARRRRR* or two from the ship’s crew. Oh, and if someone is found guilty while out at sea, we expect for him to walk the plank. That’s standard punishment on the seven seas—the guilty or cursed party must be sacrificed to the sea.

You know, when we watch those scenes, everyone on board seems overjoyed to send the offender to his death. They usually send him overboard at sword point and with sneers and evil laughs. Today, however, we’ll encounter a different reaction to justice from a different kind of crew—a divinely transformed crew.

Jonah 1:7-16

⁷ Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

⁹ He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

¹⁰ This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

¹¹ The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

¹² “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased.” ¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. ¹⁶ At this the

men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

As we engage this passage and study it, I want us to focus on three movements in it. **(1st) Jonah's sin is brought on deck.** It is revealed to every sailor on that ship. That's the first movement. **(2nd) Jonah receives a cutting rebuke.** This pagan crew shows how awful the prophet's disobedience has been. That's the second movement. **(3rd) God uses Jonah's sin for his glory.** We find that God is able to turn this sin into something beautiful. Let's look at each in its turn.

1. Jonah's sin is brought on deck (vv. 7-9).

I want you, for just a moment, to recall a time when you were caught in a sin. Remember how embarrassing it was—how humbling it was. Perhaps you even tried to justify that sin in some way. We do this don't we. Even when the best thing to do is obviously to confess and apologize, we often fight to shift the blame.

Whenever my wife points out something I did that was harsh or thoughtless, my first inclination is to point out some flaw in her which had caused me to be harsh or thoughtless. My first inclination isn't to say I'm sorry. There's simply something in our sinful nature that wants to sidestep the blame. Just think about Adam and Eve when they're confronted by God with their sin. Adam blames Eve and blames God (*for creating Eve!*) and Eve blames the serpent. (Nobody just owns it and says sorry. I wonder what God would have done with a sincere apology.)

Well, when everyone is on deck, the sailors cast lots to see who's responsible. And, the lot falls on Jonah. To his credit, he doesn't try to shift or avoid the blame. Jonah simply owns it. He owns his sin. (I would have been like—"Games of chance are evil, guys. I move we find a better system of justice.")

By the way, have you ever wondered why we don't cast lots to make decisions in the church today? I mean there's a bunch of God-ordained lot casting in Scripture. It was used to assign inheritances in the holy land (Joshua 18:2-6). Lots were utilized to choose the animal to be sacrificed on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:6-10). It was even used to choose who'd replace Judas as one of the twelve (Acts 1:23-26). So, why don't we choose pastors or make financial decisions by casting lots?

The reason is because we have the Holy Spirit in us now. There is no instance of casting lots after Pentecost. We have the discernment of God in us. *Amen!*

Well again, when the lot falls upon Jonah, he simply owns his responsibility; he just owns his sin. And, the sailors have about a million questions for the prophet. They want to know who's responsible for the storm and what Jonah does for a living and where he's from and his nationality. These are all religiously loaded questions. In the ancient world, nationalities and professions were often tied to a specific deity or religion. The crew is asking Jonah about his God. So, he responds.

I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land (v. 9).

Now, this really scares the sailors because Jonah's God is no provincial deity. This isn't some simple god who can be appeased by some simple prayer or offering like the gods they worship. Jonah is speaking to them about Yahweh—the Creator of all things, the one true God. And, they know that Jonah is running away from him. They know that Yahweh has come for Jonah (v. 10).

Look, if you were one of the sailors, wouldn't this be the moment you go-off on Jonah. Just think about it. You know he's responsible for the storm and you know God's after him. I mean, Jonah's sin has had serious repercussion for the ship's crew: they've lost money; they've lost time; and, they're very lives are currently in danger. If I were them, Jonah would already be in the water.

But, this pagan crew does it a little differently than I would.

2. Jonah receives a cutting rebuke (vv. 10-13).

Listen to what the sailors say and do upon finding out about Jonah's sin.

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before (vv. 11-13).

The sailors begin with a verbal rebuke. “What have you done?” they ask him. A modern translation might be: “Are you crazy?! You serve the God of all creation—the God who reigns over land and sea alike, and you think you can escape on a boat! Are you some kind of idiot?!” Considering the situation, this is a fair rebuke.

The more powerful and cutting rebuke comes next, however. It’s not a verbal but an active rebuke. When Jonah gives them permission to throw him into the sea—rather than callously sacrificing him—these pagan sailors begin rowing like the devil to save themselves and this guilty prophet. They work hard to save the very person who’s brought all this trouble on them—who has put their livelihood and very lives in danger with his haphazard getaway attempt.

Now, why is this a cutting rebuke? Why should this convict Jonah?

Friends, it should rebuke and convict him because the sailors are the very kind of pagan people to whom he refuses to go *and warn* concerning the coming judgment from God. In short, Jonah can see—through the sailors valiant efforts to save him—that he (*God’s prophet!*) doesn’t care as much for them as they do for him.

Jesus tells a little story about a man who was on a journey, when he was beaten and robbed and left for dead. As this poor man lies there dying, three travelers come along the road. **First** a priest comes, but he just moves to the other side of the road without helping. **Second** a Levite comes, but he also just walks by on the other side of the road. **Finally** a lowly Samaritan, someone who was an enemy to the Israelites, comes along and—in contrast to the other two—stops to help.

Friends, the first two men were people who knew Scripture and God’s laws. They were men who had good theology. The third man (the Samaritan) was a heretic in terms of his theology. But, as Jesus asks: Who was a neighbor to the dying man? Who cared enough to help? Who lived out the laws of God?

The right answer is obviously that the Samaritan is a good neighbor. And this rebuked and convicted all those in Christ’s audience who knew all the right theology but didn’t live it out. And, the same is true for Jonah here. He is rebuked for knowing what God says to do but not doing it. He is wrong for not caring for the very people for whom God cares. *Good theology but bad practice!*

One of the great lies of our day is that we need to agree with people to care for them. To put it differently, we are often told that if we don't agree with someone about political issues or social issues, then we are logically that individual's enemy. But, the Bible teaches the opposite. In the economy of God, when we find our enemy, we've found the very person we must attempt to care for the most.

There is a very simple but powerful worship song composed by *The Brilliance* which captures this idea. The repetitive chorus is this:

*When I look into the face of my enemy,
I see my brother; I see my brother.¹*

This is the radical message of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. This is the gospel. It compels us to love the very people who would set themselves in opposition to us. It demands that we work for the wellbeing and the prosperity of the enemies of God because that's what God did for us in the person and work of Jesus. *Amen!*

Friends, every time you're tempted to despise and scorn someone as an enemy remember how despicable your sin and rebellion was to God. Remember his love for his enemies. Remember that the Lord demonstrated "his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). His great forgiveness and love for us is what must drive us to demonstrate the same forgiveness and love in relationship to our enemies. It's the gospel response.

Well, let's get to our final movement.

3. God uses Jonah's sin for his glory (vv. 14-16).

Despite all the rowing, these sailors are unable to row out of the Lord's storm. They realize, consequently, that their only hope is to throw this prophet overboard. Look at the passage with me.

...they cried out to the Lord, "Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased." Then they took Jonah and threw him

¹ You can watch *The Brilliance* perform it [here](#).

overboard, and the...sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him (vv. 14-16).

If we step back and look at chapter one as a whole, we'll notice that something has changed here. When the storm first hits, we find the crew in a prayerful fervor. The author tells us—"each [sailor was afraid] and cried out to his own god" (v. 5). In the beginning of the story, we have a crew of men who have a pluralistic mindset. Each has a different god or gods. You worship your god; I'll worship mine.

Yet, by the end of the chapter, we have a crew of sailors who—at the least—have added the Lord to their pantheon but, maybe, have been completely converted to the exclusive worship of Israel's God. The men on board go from using generic to a specific name for God—explicitly, his covenant name: *Yahweh*. He is the focus of their worship by the end of the chapter. *Yahweh* is the object of the sailors' faith by the end of the chapter.

And this transformation highlights an important biblical theme.

In the book of Genesis, Joseph is attacked by his brothers and sold into slavery because they are jealous of him. In a crazy series of events, he ascends to the highest of all Egypt's officials—second only to Pharaoh. And, through his status and power, he eventually rescues his whole family from starvation. Looking back on everything, Joseph sees what God was doing and reassures his brothers: What "you intended" for "harm...God intended...for good...the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Through his brothers' sin God brought salvation.

In the book of Acts, Peter preaches a sermon during a festival in Jerusalem. He explains how Jesus Christ was crucified by the plans of wicked humans but, also, according to the sovereign plan of God. The apostle squarely places responsibility for Christ's crucifixion on the sins of humanity while, simultaneously, highlighting how the Lord was working his great salvation through that sinful act (Acts 2:14-41). God brings his redemption despite and *through* our disobedience.

Let me close with a radical idea. I said last week that there is never a Plan B with the Lord. There is only Plan A. I would maintain that that's true with the crew. I would maintain that that's true with Jonah's attempted escape. It was always part of God's plan for Jonah to run for Tarshish.

Now, that doesn't make it any less disobedient for Jonah to have run away from God. Running was still Jonah's sin, but it was simultaneously in God's plans—plans to redeem a crew of sailors, plans to perhaps redeem those sailor's families, plans with a ripple effect through generations. What the prophet intended for evil, the Lord intended for good—the saving of many lives.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, / so are [the Lord's] ways higher than [our ways] / and [the Lord's] thoughts than [our] thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

Praise the Lord for his infinite wisdom and his redemptive plans!