

Jonah: Meeting the God of Mercy

Part Two: Asleep

By *Pastor David Fields*

I. Jonah's Decent into Deep Slumber

The author is depicting Jonah's descent:

He went down to Joppa

Then he went down into the ship

He went down into the depths of the boat

Where he laid down and fell into a deep sleep.

Jonah is so turned in on himself that he doesn't notice, or care, about the calamity that *he* has brought upon the crew. This "sleep" is more than just 'physical'; it is evidence of this spiritual slumber he is in. He has been on this trajectory downward, and that leaves him apathetic and cold to the good of others around him.

II. Seeking the Common Good to God's Ultimate Glory

What is the captain of the ship rebuking Jonah for?

It's because he has no interest in the common good. They are all in this situation, together, but Jonah doesn't seem to care.

"For a moment, Jonah lives in the same "neighbourhood" with these sailors, and the storm that threatens one person threatens the entire community. Jonah fled because he didn't want to work for the good of the pagans – he wanted to serve exclusively the interests of believers. But God show him here that he is the God of all people and Jonah needs to see himself as being part of the whole human community, not only a member of a faith community."

– Tim Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah*

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us: "You are the light of the world..." and that we are, therefore to, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." – Matthew 5:16.

III. Jonah's Inconsistency (And Ours)

God has sent his prophet to speak God's word to non-Israelites, to point them to God. And yet here, it's the non-Israelite who is speaking to the prophet of the Lord, Jonah, pointing *him* to God!

It's often easy to spot inconsistencies in others. It is often much more difficult to see them in ourselves, right? At the moment we call out Jonah, the book makes us ask the same question of ourselves.

IV. Shallow Identities

The sailors ask Jonah: "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 word is "fear", I 'fear', meaning revere and reverence, with deep awe and respect, knowing I am accountable to the Living God – "I worship] the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

“Since Jonah identifies himself first ethnically, then religiously, we may infer that his ethnicity is foremost in his self-identity.”

– Daniel Timmer

When the choice between being loyal to God’s Word, or loyal to his nation is pressed, he chooses loyalty to his nation as more important than bringing God’s message to another people group.

When we don’t take the grace-gifted identity as God’s children and citizens of God’s Kingdom as our fundamental identity, then it is possible to be more concerned about one’s nation or ethnicity than about the kingdom of God; than adopting mission-shaped priorities.

“Shallow Christian identities explain why professing Christians can be racists and greedy materialists, addicted to beauty and pleasure, or filled with anxiety and prone to overwork. All this comes because it is not Christ’s love but the world’s power, approval, comfort, and control that are the real roots of our self-identity.”

– Tim Keller

What’s the solution?

To recognize the mercy we have been shown, and that’s demonstrated through Christ’s love and self-sacrifice for us. When we know how far he has gone to make us his own, that transforms us. We let that sink deeper into our hearts. That’s what ‘awakens’ our hearts to God’s work in and around us.

V. God’s Good Work (Sometimes Despite Us)

Jonah’s theologically accurate statements about God’s rule and reign over creation “seem to be nothing more than theological formulas that he has memorized but never internalized. Jonah’s claim that YHWH, the sole creator of the cosmos, has authority over all that exists completes the removal of their mute and impotent gods from the scene.”

– Daniel Timmer

“Then they [the sailors] 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 overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men *greatly feared the Lord*, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.” – Jonah 1:14-16

Note the humour and irony of the scene: the very reason Jonah flees in the first place – which he explicitly states in chapter 4 – is because he does not want to extend the love and mercy of God to non-Israelite people. And in the very act of running away from the mission, we see that these former pagans come to love and worship the Living God, whom he claims to love and worship.

Is there something you *aren’t doing*, that God is calling you to, because you think, “What if I mess it up?” Remember this. God works through Jonah’s story – hilariously in spite of him. He can do the same with us.

VI. Waking Up

The “storm” wasn’t a sign that God didn’t love Jonah, but that he really did. That he cared enough about Jonah to correct him; to reorient his path. To bring him back to his purpose in life. See, the God who sends the storm, also sends the fish.

“¹⁷ Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”

God is at work to preserve and heal Jonah of his narrow, broken vision of life. This is another picture of God’s great mercy.

Paul writes: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” – Ephesians 5:14.

It’s couched in a call to put away deeds of darkness and embrace a life of “making the most of every opportunity,” of getting on with joining God’s work in the world. May it be so for you, for us together.

Life Group Study Questions and Reflection

Open Up

Briefly describe a major storm that you were in. What did that do to your sense of ‘alertness’? Why?

Dig In

Read Jonah 1:1-6

1. How does this text describe Jonah? Have you ever had a time where you could relate to his ‘slumber’ because of a time of walking away from God? What was that like?
2. In verse 4 we read that the storm God sent was threatening to ‘break up’ the ship. Jonah had placed his confidence in the ship to help him run from God – he paid for it, boarded it, and now is sound asleep in it.
 - a. How does it sit with you to know that God might send/allow ‘storms’ in the life of his people to awaken us? (Read Hebrews 12:7-13 for more insight).
 - b. Have you ever had an experience where God had to ‘break apart’ what you had put your confidence in to awaken you? What was that like?
 - c. What might God need to ‘break apart’ to awake you spiritually? Are you experiencing that now? Share with the group how they can pray for you to come ‘fully awake’ to God and his plans (see Eph 5:13-16).
3. **Read Jonah 1:7-17.** What are some major contrasts we see between Jonah and the sailors?
4. Why is it important that our lives actively reflect what we believe? (See James 2:14-17)
5. How have you worked to make the connection between belief and action in your own life? Where could you improve?