

## THE PROPHET'S PROGRESS

JONAH 1:4-16

I.

Most of you probably know that the Bible has sold more copies throughout the world than any other book in human history. According to at least some lists, what is the #2 best seller in the English language? Any guesses? It is *Pilgrim's Progress*.

*Pilgrim's Progress* (PROJECTOR ON--- PILGRIM'S PROGRESS) was written by John Bunyan and first published in 1678. John Bunyan, who had very little formal education, was a pastor of an independent church in England. He did not have the approval of the Church of England to be a pastor. Back in that time and place this was a major no-no. In fact the Church of England had him thrown into jail. During his 13 years behind bars Bunyan began writing his most famous work.

*Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory, a symbolic story, about a Christian pilgrim who embarks upon a trip to the Celestial City, which symbolizes heaven. Along his path he encounters numerous trials and detours and temptations. At one point on his journey the pilgrim gets off of the right path and wanders onto the grounds of Doubting Castle. As he is about to be captured by the Giant Despair, who is the master of Doubting Castle, he reflects upon his predicament and the difficulty that confronts him in returning to the proper path to the Celestial City. He utters a profound spiritual truth. The Christian pilgrim, who is named "Christian," says, (QUOTATION--- THEN I THOUGHT...) **"Then I thought that it is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out."**

Two thousand years before John Bunyan lived, the prophet Jonah learned this principle via a painful experience. In one brief verse we saw last week that he decided to get off of the path. Instead of obeying God's call to go to Nineveh (JONAH 01), he headed in the opposite direction to Tarshish. In the rest of #1 and in all of #2 we are going to see the painful struggle that Jonah has to experience before he gets back on the right path. If we wish to avoid a lot of grief in life, we will tune in to the lesson that John Bunyan and Jonah have to teach us.

We have seen thus far from our study of Jonah that God wanted the prophet to go and preach to the chief city of the Assyrian Empire, because He loves lost people and because He loves Israel. (DIVIDED KINGDOM) The northern kingdom of Israel in the 800s BC had become corrupt. God was going to use

the Assyrians to discipline the Israelites. But first He wanted the chief city of Assyria to experience a spiritual awakening so that when the Assyrians did invade Israel, they would be much less cruel than they were at most other times in their history. Even in discipline the Lord was exercising compassion upon His chosen people. (PROJECTOR OFF)

I suggested last week that Jonah rejected God's call to go to Nineveh because he hoped that the wickedness of Nineveh would bring God's judgment upon the city. Jonah knew that the Lord was planning to use the Assyrians to discipline Israel, and he knew from what God had told him that the evil of the Ninevites might soon incur God's wrath. If the Lord decided to wipe out the Assyrian capital, it would mean that this empire was not going to be in a position any time soon to hurt Jonah's own country. In my interpretation of the situation Jonah was hoping that the destruction would happen to Nineveh so that his countrymen would be spared from judgment and would have more time to change spiritually.

II.

Our rationalizations and judgments, however, never stack up well against God's direct commands. So in vv. 4 & 5 of Jonah #1, which is p. 774 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we are going to learn the lesson that INDIVIDUAL SIN AFFECTS OTHERS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. INDIVIDUAL SIN AFFECTS OTHERS.) Verse 4 says, **"But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up."** The original Hebrew says that "the ship thought that she would be broken in pieces."

The underlying claim is that God has authority over the wind and the waves. What divine purpose that he has with hurricanes and storms is not usually clear to us. The purpose of the storm here is clear. God is pursuing Jonah.

Severe storms on the Mediterranean are normally limited to the winter season. This could not have been the winter. For no ship captain would undertake a voyage at this time of year to go all the way to Tarshish at the other end of the Mediterranean. Those of you who are familiar with the Book of Acts will remember that the ship that was supposed to bring Paul to Italy as a prisoner got in trouble with a bad storm because the captain set sail too close to the winter season.

Perhaps Jonah minimized his direct disobedience to God's command by telling his conscience that this was a sin of omission rather than a sin of commission. He wasn't hurting anybody. He wasn't doing anybody any harm. Nobody else was even going to know that God had told him to go to Nineveh. This was just a problem between him and God. If the mission was really important, God would get someone else to do the job. After all, Jonah was trying to protect his countrymen, who were God's chosen people.

Maybe he was just getting his signals crossed anyway. Maybe he had made things up in his head about God wanting him to go to Assyria.

But Jonah's sin was not a victimless crime. It was going to have an impact upon the entire ship upon which he was traveling. Verse 5 describes the effect of the storm upon his shipmates: **"Then the mariners were afraid [Literally the term is "salts." These guys are old salts.], and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep."**

Jonah disobeyed God. So God was going to go after him. He used a storm to do that. This storm now threatened the lives of a shipload of sailors. These sailors threw their cargo overboard. So there was a material loss traceable to Jonah's sin. Now the lives of the sailors were endangered. As the men prayed to their gods, Jonah slept. It was a deep sleep from which the storm did not even awake him. Jonah was trying to tune out the world.

In 1991 George Ryan took office as Secretary of State in Illinois. He took an oath of office before God swearing to uphold the US and Illinois state constitutions and to perform his duties to the best of his abilities. He soon became involved in a scheme with a number of employees in his department to sell licenses and contracts and leases to people who were seeking them. Government bureaucracy could take a long time to wade through. So for a little money on the side they would perform a service of speeding up the process. Some people coming to the office might have some things in the past that would not qualify them for a lease or a license or a contract. But these were usually no big deals. One guy came looking for a CDL so that he could drive a truck. He had some things in his past record that might disqualify him. But he was willing to pay the money. So he got the license.

In November of 1994 he was driving his truck on I-94 in Wisconsin, a freeway I traveled fairly often years ago. A scrap of metal fell off of his truck because he had not tied it down properly. There was a van following his truck that happened to contain a Baptist pastor and his wife and his six youngest children. It punctured his gas tank and the van blew up. All six kids were burned to death. The parents survived. The kickback scheme in the Illinois state government was not a victimless crime to Scott and Janet Willis.

An investigation into the truck driver revealed the larger scheme of corruption. (GEORGE RYAN) Secretary of State George Ryan had become governor of Illinois by this time. He eventually went to prison. The state of Illinois had to shell out millions of dollars in the civil suit that followed. That could not begin to compensate for the loss to the pastor's family of six children.

Our society has bought into the thinking that disobedience to at least some of God's laws involves victimless crimes, if they are crimes at all. This is especially true in the sexual arena. What people do

behind closed doors is nobody else's business. But it is a lie. Families are broken up and government has to fund babies who are born outside of marriage. Women suffer from guilt by being pressured into abortions. Sexually transmitted diseases are spread. Babies are born with abnormalities because parents were doing drugs in these supposedly victimless crimes.

Some of our younger gals have gone through a program in the last few weeks which is resulting in a commitment that we are going to see them make at the end of our service. It is a tough commitment. For they are going to be faced with boys and men who will tell them that if they love them, they will let them. They will deal with a culture that says that everybody is doing it and that the way to make sure that marriage will work is to live together first.

When the disobedient believer has a position of spiritual leadership, as was true with Jonah, the negative effects of disobedience can be especially devastating. Several years before I came onto the staff of my first church, there was a pastor there who became involved in immorality with several women both inside and outside of the church. His misdeeds finally came to the attention of the church leaders, who confronted him about his sin. He denied it. A split resulted in the congregation. Some believed his story. Others did not. His daughter suffered severe emotional problems from what was going on with her father. I don't think that she ever got married. I met the son years later. He seemed to be messed up. Finally the pastor admitted his wrongdoing and left the church.

When I came to the church several years later, the effects of what happened were still evident. Some Christians had become disillusioned with the church. Some had become distrustful of all pastors. Unbelievers who found out became more negative about the gospel. Individual sin affects others.

III.

Because our Lord is a perfect father, he also disciplines His children. Thus in vv. 6-10 we find that GOD DISCIPLINES SINNING BELIEVERS. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. GOD DISCIPLINES SINNING BELIEVERS.) The storm was clearly instrumental in that discipline, but the Lord was also going to use the pagan sailors. Perhaps they stumbled upon him while they were emptying the cargo of the ship.

Verse 6 tells us, **"So the captain came and said to him, 'What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.'"** The captain used the same verbs that God used in v. 2 when He told Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh and call out against it.

The identity of the captain and his crew is not stated. Probably they were not Jews. The Phoenicians, Philistines and people of Tyre lived along the Mediterranean coast and were known to be seafaring people. One of these groups, or some combination thereof, may have manned the ship.

Most all of the people of the Ancient Near East and the Mediterranean world were polytheistic. Often they believed that certain gods had power over particular aspects of life and of the world. Often they believed that the power of the gods was limited to a certain geographical region. Then it was also difficult to know what god or gods might be upset and might be responsible for some calamity. So in the situation which these sailors faced, they wanted everybody on board to be praying to his god or gods. It was sad that the pagan captain had to call on the prophet of the one true God to do some praying.

According to v. 7, **"And they said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.'" So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.**" If praying to all of the gods did not work, then the next natural step in the thinking of these sailors was that one or several of the gods may be upset at somebody on the ship. So the true sovereign God of the universe worked the casting of the lots out such that Jonah was chosen.

Earlier in the Law of Moses God told His people that the high priest could have lots by which he would be able to determine the will of God in certain situations. The thinking of many scholars is that lots involved two flat stones. (LOTS) One side was white and the other was black. The white side meant yes. The black side meant no. If one side came up white and the other black, it meant that God was not answering. In this situation involving Jonah the suspicion of some scholars is that it would be interpreted simply as try again. In the picture on the screen the white stone has the Hebrew word Urim, and the black stone has the word Thummim. The lots that the Jewish high priest had were called in the Old Testament the Urim and Thummim.

Verses 8 & 9 tell us, **"Then they said to him, 'Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?' And he said to them, 'I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'"**

The sailors' belief in the results of casting lots to find the reason for this calamity was probably increased by the fact that the stranger among them, perhaps a mysterious stranger at that, is the one who is singled out. So they ask questions to find out about him. Jonah was probably the only follower of the true God in the boat. He is also the prophet of that God, but he has to have his spiritual identity dragged out of him. It is always embarrassing, isn't it, when we find ourselves slow to share our faith and an unbeliever has to drag the gospel out of us?

Jonah does come clean. The terms that he uses to describe his people and his faith were probably standard descriptions used by the Hebrews to describe themselves--- like we might say, "I'm a born again Christian," or "I'm an evangelical Christian who believes the Bible." It is ironic that Jonah speaks of

"fearing" the true God. If Jonah really had a proper fear of God, He would not be on this boat fleeing to Tarshish. He would be on the way to Nineveh instead.

Verse 10: **"Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them."**

"What is this you have done!" These are the same words in the original Hebrew that the Lord used when He confronted Eve with her sin in the Garden of Eden. I wonder if Jonah was familiar with that text. If he was, it must have been an especially painful rebuke. God had called him to go and rebuke the Gentiles. Now the Gentiles were rebuking him.

It is painful, isn't it, when unbelievers criticize us for not living up to our faith? Abraham twice tried to pass his wife off as merely being his sister. In one case the Egyptian pharaoh rebuked him for his deception. In the other case the king of Gerar, a Philistine, confronted Abraham with his falsehood. In both cases Abraham's sin had adverse effects on the household of the unbelieving ruler.

God disciplines His children when they get out of line. The Lord had an important job to be done, and Jonah took off in the other direction. In his case discipline was firm and fast. Jonah was the one to do the job, and he was not going to get away so easily.

In other cases the Lord is more patient. Certainly He had been patient with the northern kingdom of Israel. For almost 200 years the nation had been ruled by ungodly kings. The hearts of the common people had eventually become corrupted as well. So God brought along famines. He allowed the nation to experience military defeats. He sent prophets to warn the people, but their hearts were hardened. The Assyrians were going to come down to Israel in a few years and overrun the nation. The discipline that Israel was going to experience would be painful, but it was necessary because the Jews had not responded to softer methods of discipline. The Lord often follows a similar pattern with us. Usually He is patient. He convicts our conscience that we are straying away from Him. He brings other Christians across our path. He exposes us to our wrongdoing. He brings problems into our lives. Sometimes he gives us health difficulties or financial struggles to get our attention. When we remain resistant and hard, he may use harsher methods.

In Hebrews #12 the New Testament (HEBREWS 12:7) tells us, **"God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? (HEBREWS 12:9) Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? (HEBREWS 12:10) For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness."**

Richie was a kid that I had in my youth group years ago. (PROJECTOR OFF) He professed to be a born-again Christian, and he had been baptized in our church. But as he moved through his teen years, he became more and more rebellious. He started doing drugs and became more sporadic in his church involvement. A couple of times I had to remove him from the youth group because of his misbehavior. Eventually he quit coming to church altogether. I was suspicious that he was not only taking drugs but also dealing them. It was difficult for him to get back right with the Lord. For **"...it is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out."**

One day he was taking a spin on his motorcycle, and he lost control. A paramedic who happened to be from my church was the first rescue official on the scene. He scraped Richie off of a tree. He later told me that he was pretty sure that the kid was a goner. But he survived. I chalked up his encounter with a tree to the work of the divine hand of discipline.

It is better to get back on the right path when we realize that we have strayed, not only for the sake of the work of God and for the sake of people around us who are adversely affected by our sin, but also for our own sakes. God's discipline can be painful. If we are truly part of His family, He will discipline us.

IV.

In vv. 11-15 we are shown that A GRACIOUS GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSES IN SPITE OF OURSELVES. In v. 11 the sailors ask Jonah what they should do to make the sea calm. To these polytheistic men the correct procedure in satisfying the anger of the gods was very important. They did not know the God of Israel well. So they had to find out from Jonah about how to placate the wrath of his God.

So in v. 12 Jonah tells them, **"Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you."** It seems to me that Jonah could have confessed his sin and told them to bring him back to Joppa so that he could carry out his mission ordered by God. It seems to me that he is still resisting God's will. I also wonder why he wanted the sailors to throw him overboard. Could he not simply have jumped overboard himself, rather than heaping guilt upon these well intentioned sailors?

Whatever was going on in Jonah's mind the pagan sailors are less willing than Jonah is to have him tossed into the sea. They seem to be more concerned about doing God's will than Jonah is. According to v. 13, **"Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them."** These sailors are fearful about harming the servant of this obviously powerful God.

In the end the sailors seem to have no choice. **"Therefore they called out to the Lord, 'O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.' So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging."**

The calming of the sea at the time when they tossed Jonah into the water left a deep impression upon the crewmen. To experience this fierce storm at this unusual time of year, to hear the story of this prophet and then to see the storm stop when they threw the prophet of Israel's God overboard was too much to be explained away through coincidence. Even when the wind from a storm ceases, normally the waves continue to be large and dangerous for a considerable time to come. But here the waves suddenly become calm. Whether these sailors truly came to a saving faith in the God of Israel is not completely clear. But at the very least this experience caused them to fear, and to become attracted to, Jonah's God.

Thus the Lord brought good out of this situation despite Jonah's sinfulness. God used Jonah in spite of himself. Sometimes we preacher types are guilty of making statements like "God will only use you if you are walking in fellowship with Him." That is not necessarily true. Jonah was out of fellowship with the Lord. He was trying to get away from God. He was running away from the divine mission to which he had been assigned. He was trying to keep his identity secret from his shipmates. He is still resisting God's call to go to Nineveh. Yet God accomplishes gracious purposes with these pagan sailors. For they are drawn to worship of the one true God.

Scott and Janet Willis (SCOTT AND JANET WILLIS) were understandably shaken by the sudden death of six of their nine children. But they used much of the money from their large settlement to set up a foundation. They have used those funds for a variety of Christian and charitable causes. Many people have been blessed through their charitable concern. Good came out of this terrible tragedy.  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

The Lord is a sovereign and gracious God. He always accomplishes his purposes, often in spite of the wrongdoing of His creatures. Often He uses godly people in right relationship with Him. Sometimes He uses sinners who are disobedient to Him. Always, always it is better for us if we are seeking to be obedient to Him. Because of his disobedience Jonah ended up with a guilty conscience, he ended up in a storm, he ended up in embarrassment in front of a bunch of pagans and he ended up being tossed into the raging sea.

Our sins do affect others. God will discipline us when we get off of the straight and narrow path. God may use us in spite of our sins. David learned this in his experience with Bathsheba. One day he was hanging around in the palace when he should have been on the battlefield. He saw somebody else's wife taking a bath. He ended up inviting Bathsheba to come to his house for coffee, and he had sex with her.



But, you see, it is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out. David's life got more complicated. His sin began to affect others. Bathsheba got pregnant. Her husband was away on the battlefield. David tried to get him together with his wife Bathsheba, but it did not work. So David had the husband killed. One guy dead because of David's sin. The baby who resulted from his sin also died. Furthermore, God proclaimed that this sin would result in trouble in David's family. It did. David's sin affected others.

God also disciplines His children. In the Psalms we learn about the guilty conscience that plagued David. His sin affected him physically. The Lord said that the death of his son by Bathsheba was part of that discipline. Then also God sent a prophet to confront King David. Finally he repented.

Then, thirdly, God accomplished His gracious purposes in spite of David's sin. Bathsheba did become David's wife. Together they had a son named Solomon. Through him the royal line of David would result. One day the Lord Jesus would be born to the descendants of Solomon.

V.

Verse 16 contains the last lesson in our passage. It reminds us that the EVIDENCE OF THE WORK OF GOD SHOULD PROVOKE THANKSGIVING AND WORSHIP. **"Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly..."**

Literally the Hebrew text says, **"Then the men feared the Lord with a great fear--- and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows."** The offering was made not to an unknown generic God, but rather to the God of Israel. For the text uses the Hebrew term YHWH, which is the specific name of the God of Israel.

The sacrifice that the sailors offered was an act of thanksgiving and worship. It was an appropriate response to the miraculous working of God that they had just witnessed. They had just seen both a dramatic evidence of this God and a gracious act of deliverance from the terrible storm by this God. The Lord always deserves to be thanked and worshiped for His work. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So what should we take away from our story? We learn that it is always better to stay on the path to the Celestial City. We should remember that it is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out. The ticket to Tarshish always looks attractive. But in the end we will regret having done what we weren't supposed to do.

If you find that you have strayed from the path, do what you should to get back on it. It may be hard, but it is the right thing to do, and it is the best thing for us and for the people who are close to us. Begin by confessing your situation to the Lord God. He is a forgiving and compassionate God. Perhaps it would

be helpful to talk to a mature Christian friend about it. If you are on the path but are tempted to stray, remember, it is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out.