

The Response of the Sailors to Jonah's Testimony

Jonah 1:10-14

Jonah 1:10-14 - *"Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. ¹¹ Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?"—for the sea was growing more tempestuous. ¹² And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me." ¹³ Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, "We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You."*

Background Notes

God had called Jonah to go to preach to the great city of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. Recently I discovered that two ladies in a church where I sometimes preach told me that they are Assyrians! They trace their ethnic roots back to ancient Assyria. When we get to Heaven, maybe those ladies will find out that their ancestors heard the preaching of Jonah!

But Jonah didn't want to preach to Nineveh. Why? Because Nineveh was an Assyrian city, and the Assyrians were enemies of Israel. In the ancient world, the pagan Assyrians were known for their atrocities and cruel treatment of their enemies. Jonah did not want God to show any mercy to Nineveh, so he disobeyed God and ran in the other direction.

Jonah "fled from the presence of the Lord." He disobeyed. I once heard a preacher say that Jonah "partially obeyed." His reasoning was that the Lord said to Jonah, *"Arise, go to Nineveh,"* and in verse 3 Jonah arose – and thus it was "partial obedience." Well, when Jonah rose up to go to Tarshish, that was **not** "partial obedience." It was **100% disobedience!**

But God was not done with Jonah. God sent a huge storm that disrupted all of Jonah's carefully laid plans to get away. (God has a way of doing this!) Has God ever disrupted your plans - for your own good? If your life is disrupted right now, maybe God is changing the plans you made – and He's doing it for your own good!

Notice Jonah's answer to the sailors – and remember, Jonah gave this reply after the lot had fallen on him, so the sailors already knew that he was the cause of the life-threatening storm. He told the sailors: *"I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land"* (v9). And then he told them he was running away from the Lord

(v10) – and that was the reason for the storm! He gave this answer in the midst of the violent storm, maybe even up on the deck, as the wind was howling and the waves were threatening to overwhelm the ship.

Those sailors were afraid! Phoenician sailors were pagans who worshiped the god Baal, and they believed that Baal controlled the heavens and the sea. But Jonah boldly proclaimed the truth – that the one true God, the God of the Hebrews - **He** is the One who controls the heavens and the seas! In fact, **He** is the One who **made** the seas and the dry land!

So Jonah boldly proclaimed this truth, even while he was disobeying God. Although he was running away, he feared the Lord who not only controlled the sea, but He had also created the sea and the land. Jonah's theology was "right on" - and very orthodox.

But - **orthodoxy is not synonymous with spirituality!** Rightness of theology does not necessarily mean rightness of life.

Doctrinal Points

1. A believer's disobedience results in disruption for unbelievers.

The sailors were "*exceedingly afraid*" (v10). Their lives are totally disrupted and in peril. They had already thrown the cargo overboard to lighten the ship, but the ship was about to break up. Verse 13 says that they "*rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them.*" And by the way, this ship wasn't some little rowboat. This was a large merchant ship of ancient times, with rows of oars, but the sailors could not make any headway against the worsening storm.

What a picture of an unbeliever's life in a state of disruption because of the storms of life. In this case, Jonah was at fault - and the sailors knew it: "*For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them*" (v10). Do you see the doctrinal point? A believer's disobedience can result in disruption for many others – even for unbelievers. Don't think that believers can sin in a vacuum. When believers disobey, their personal relationship with the Lord is affected, and other people are affected as well – both believers and unbelievers.

A few years ago a Christian man came to me for counseling, because he had decided to divorce his wife. He knew that this was disobedience, but he believed that the Lord would forgive him, and then he could move on with his life. I pointed out to him that besides the serious sin of divorce, his disobedience was disrupting the lives of many people. His heart-broken wife, his two vulnerable young children, his in-laws (who were not believers), and his own Christian parents - all were all seriously affected. And what about the disruption of the Christian testimony in the community, and where he worked? He hadn't thought of this. Sadly, like Jonah, he decided to run away.

When King David disobeyed the Lord, Nathan the prophet came to David and said: *“By this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme” (2 Samuel 12:14)*. David’s sin had given the pagan enemies of the Lord a golden opportunity to show their utter contempt for one true God, and to mock the God of Israel.

A believer’s disobedience results in contempt for the Lord and disruption of lives, even the lives of unbelievers.

2. A believer’s disobedience results in rebuke from unbelievers.

The captain of the ship had already rebuked Jonah. *“So the captain came to him, and said to him, “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish” (v6)*. Now all the sailors rebuked Jonah: *“Why have you done this?”*

Has an unbeliever ever said something like that to you? *“Why have you done this, when you call yourself a Christian?”* When I was in high school, an unbelieving teacher said this to me. I was being disruptive in study hall, and I’ll never forget the teacher saying this to me. What a rebuke! Has an unbeliever ever rebuked you because of your sin?

Think of Christians who have been unethical in their business practices, who are fined and disgraced - by unbelievers - when their wrongful practices are exposed. How tragic when greedy TV “evangelists” are rebuked by unbelievers and mocked by the press, and even sent to prison for ripping off their unsuspecting viewers. What a disgraceful reflection on the Lord and the testimony of His people!

The most amazing thing to me about Jonah’s disobedience and the rebuke by unbelievers is that God used Jonah’s testimony - in spite of his disobedience! Before Jonah’s testimony, the Phoenician sailors were praying to their gods. They were pagan polytheists. But after Jonah gave his testimony, they began to pray to the one true God, calling Him Lord! *“Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, “We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man’s life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You” (v14)*.

And notice - after the storm was over, they didn’t go back to their old gods. Look at verse 16: *“Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows.”* That doesn’t sound like temporary “fox hole conversions” to me! These men did not go back to their old ways once the pressure of the storm was off. They sacrificed to the Lord and made vows to Him!

How ironic, in one sense. Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh and preach to the pagan Assyrians, but God used Jonah - in spite of his disobedience - to witness to those pagan sailors. And they turned to the Lord!

What a **God of grace**! Our God can use us, even when we are disobedient. However, even though God may continue to use us, that **does not** excuse or condone our disobedience. And unbelievers will indeed rebuke us – and even disgrace

us - when we disobey. A believer's disobedience results in rebuke from unbelievers.

Practical Application

Would you rather die than change?

When the sailors asked Jonah what they should do to calm the storm, Jonah replied: *"Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you"* (v12). Notice what Jonah did not say. He didn't say, "If you want the sea to be calm, turn the ship around and head for home so that I can change my ways and obey the Lord." No, he didn't say that. Why? Because at that point in his life, Jonah would rather die than change!

Jonah was not yet ready to go to Nineveh – even though he knew that God had sent the storm. If you were running away from God, would you be ready to change by this time - or would you rather die than change? You see, Jonah was satisfied with the ways of the Lord - until he realized that the Lord wanted to extend mercy to Nineveh! This was God's "unwanted grace." Jonah did not want this change – and he would rather die than change.

Would you rather die than change? What about a radical change in your lifestyle, so that you can be a more effective witness? What about a change in your church that you don't like, but the spiritual leaders believe this change would be best for the congregation - or would make the fellowship a more effective testimony in the community? Are you willing to change? Or would you rather die than change?

I know Christians who adamantly declare that they would rather die than change. They even take pride in this attitude. These people are usually so legalistic, or so steeped in their traditions, that they would rather die than see God develop a new ministry or move the congregation in a new direction. "We don't want our church to be involved in the inner city." "We like the church as it is." "Don't take us out of our comfort zone." "We've always done it this way!" "Everything is fine, so don't rock the boat!"

These folks would rather die than change - they would rather die and take their church with them. Meanwhile, the "Ninevehs" of their world are left in their lost and sinful state, and remain under God's judgment.

What about us? Do we really want the Lord's will? Do we really care about the lost souls - the "Ninevehs"? Would we rather die than change?

We need to think about our attitudes. Would **you** rather die than change?