



“The Sleeping Servant and the Perishing Pagans”
Jonah 1:5-6

Idea: Jonah’s sleep ensures the death of the pagan sailors.

Intro: If there is anything to learn from the headlines over the last few weeks, it is that circumstances can quickly change. The Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan has crippled that nation with fear. Their brutal tactics have caused soldiers and cities to surrender without a shot even being fired. Their brutality toward anyone who refuses their way of life means Christians are in danger. Many of them will be forced to recant their faith or be executed. We need to pray for our brothers and sisters to be strong and faithful even if it costs them their lives. We also need to pray for the gospel to flourish in the midst of great persecution.

Honestly, as Americans, we know little to nothing about persecution. We hear about Afghan Christians suffering and our immediate response is to pray for their escape. Why would we want them to suffer? We would not wish that on anyone. On the other hand, it very well could be God’s sovereign plan for them to stand in the face of persecution and boldly proclaim the gospel both in word and deed.

We may not know how to pray for our brothers and sisters at times, but we do know what we as Christians are to do. Jesus commanded His church to “Go...and make disciples” (Matt 28:19). Billy Graham once said: “The evangelistic harvest is always urgent. The destiny of men and of nations is always being decided. Every generation is strategic. We are not responsible for the past generation, and we cannot bear the full responsibility for the next one; but we do have our generation. God will hold us responsible as to how well we fulfill our responsibilities to this age and take advantage of our opportunities.”

The same was true for the prophet Jonah. God said, “Go!” And Jonah said, “No!” He was told to rise and go to Nineveh to preach against their sin. He instead rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. As we have discovered, Jonah’s disobedience was not a simple disregard but outright rebellion against God’s lordship over his life. His rebellion was met with God’s discipline. The Lord “hurled a great wind upon the sea” (1:4). God was going to get the attention and obedience of His prophet. We also discover in Jonah’s story that the effects of our actions are never isolated to ourselves. They always impact others. As we look at verses five and six, I want you to see the sleeping servant and the perishing pagans.

[Read Jonah 1:5-6.](#)

Inquiry: As we have seen, Jonah is the story of a man who is on the run from God, seeking to subvert His will. Remember, he is the prophet of God. He has been used of God to strengthen and expand the borders of Israel (2 Kings 14:23-25). He follows in the line of great men of God such as Elijah and Elisha. However, over time Jonah's heart has grown dull. His ears can barely hear the Word of the Lord, and his eyes have closed.

Jonah went down to Joppa and found a ship that would take him as far as possible from the Lord's call on his life. The storm that the Lord hurled at him "*threatened to break up*" the ship. The mariners recognized that this storm had a divine aspect to it and discerned it as a divine reaction toward some kind of sin. The dire situation compelled them to call upon any and every god that might be the cause behind the storm. At the same time, they did whatever they could to save themselves, so they threw the cargo overboard in order to lighten the ship. While all this chaos was taking place, Jonah was asleep. He was as dead to the world as he was to God.

The Bible draws a stark contrast between the prophet Jonah and the pagan sailors. Let's look at this briefly. The pagans possessed an acute awareness of danger. They recognized the severity of the storm and fragility of the ship. Jonah on the other hand was oblivious to everything. He was fast asleep. He had no idea that the ship was about to break apart. The pagans, knowing the danger they were in, desired help. They looked to religion and spirituality for help. "*Each cried out to his god*" (1:5). They were polytheists who were convinced that one of their gods was angry with one of them. Therefore, they called on their gods. Surely, they confessed sin and made vows. They also trusted in their works. "*They hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it.*" If perhaps their god would not help them, then they would do what they could to work themselves out of danger. In contrast Jonah was opposed to help. When the captain went below the deck to grab another container to throw overboard, he found Jonah sleeping amongst the cargo. He probably heard him snoring. I can only imagine the disgust of the captain. "How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up!! Call on your god!" Jonah is startled not just by the captain standing over him but by the captain's words. Just a few days ago, he had heard similar words, "Arise, go!" Now, he hears, "Arise, pray!" This word haunts him, so rather than seeking God's help, Jonah is opposed to it. He never prays in chapter one. He does not want to pray because he does not want to hear what God has to say. He is spiritually inactive. He is numb. As we contrast Jonah's response to that of the sailors, there are some lessons to learn as believers in Christ.

Three Lessons Learned

1. A believer's faith ought to be evident and known by others.

People tend to act funny around people who walk with God. Chuck Swindoll shares two examples: Once during a flight, a man sitting next to me during mealtime nervously changed his drink request from a Bloody Mary to a ginger ale after learning I was a pastor. He leaned over and whispered in a sweat that he had really meant to order that in the first place. I told him not to worry and that I did not mind at all. He took this as a hint, and in a panic ordered me a Bloody Mary. When I declined, he got up and changed seats. In his haste, the man spilled his meal all over me.

Once while visiting a member in the hospital, I was walking down the long hallway to the room of the person I came to visit. As I approached the room, her husband came out to leave. On his way out the door, he lit up a cigarette and glanced down the hall. He immediately recognized me from a distance. I smiled and waved. He nervously waved back and was absolutely at a loss to know how to hide the cigarette. Still holding the burning cigarette, he slid his hand into his pocket! I decided to act as though I had not seen it and engaged him in a lengthy conversation. It became hilarious. The more we talked the shorter the cigarette got in his hand and the more he looked like a chimney. There was smoke swirling out of his pants pocket and curling up behind his coat collar. Unable to restrain myself any longer, I asked him why he did not go ahead and finish his cigarette. Would you believe it? He denied even having a cigarette. Within seconds he dashed to the elevator and fled, which is probably good. Had we talked much longer, the poor man would have become a living sacrifice.

People act funny, but here is the point...People ought to be able to recognize your faith and walk with Christ. This is important not because it makes them uncomfortable, though it often does, but because it makes them aware that you hold words of comfort and hope in a chaotic and cruel world.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. – Matt 5:16

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, points out that believers are to live as lights on the hill giving light to the world around them. Paul magnifies these words as he exhorts the Philippian believers to live differently than those around them. He calls on believers to be blameless and innocent, thereby shining as lights in the world.

...that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world... – Phil 2:15

When the captain went below the deck and stumbled upon Jonah sleeping among the cargo, he had no idea that Jonah was a prophet of God. He took him for just another person like himself. What a sad testimony!

Hey Christian, do the people in your family know of your faith in Christ? Do your coworkers recognize your walk with Jesus? Can the people in your neighborhood see the light of Christ shining from your home? And I am not talking about what you are against. Do they know what you are for? Do they see your love for people? Do they see in you a generous and hospital follower of Christ? Your faith ought to be evidently on display before others. Yes, it will make people uncomfortable at times, but it should. Light and darkness are never comfortable companions.

2. A believer should be spiritually engaged in the lives of others.

The captain calls on the prophet to pray. Was there anything that could have been more familiar for Jonah than prayer? Listening and speaking to God are what prophets do. They stand in the gap between the Lord and the people. They are spiritually engaged in the battle. Unfortunately, Jonah had disengaged. He had turned off his transponder. When called upon to pray on behalf of a band of perishing pagans, Jonah refuses. In doing so, he denies lost men an opportunity for the hope of the Lord's salvation. Perhaps, he feels he cannot tell them of the Lord's mercy because he does not want to tell Nineveh of the Lord's mercy. All around him are people who want a solution to escape death, but Jonah is trying to flee from the presence of the Solution!

Hey Christian, there are people all around you who are looking for a solution to escape death. If COVID has taught us anything, it has taught us that people are scared to death of dying. They know that the end of life is looming on the horizon. It is inevitable.

Why is death a reality in this world? According to the Bible, it is a consequence of man's rebellion (Gen 2:17). It is the physical manifestation of a greater spiritual reality (Gen 3:7). Sin brought death, both spiritual and physical. Adam's sin in the Garden has been passed on to every generation since. We are all sinners and under the just penalty for our sin (Rom 3:23; 6:23). God, however, is gracious (2 Pet 3:9). The metanarrative of the Bible is redemption. All sixty-six books coalesce around the cross and the life that comes from it. Therefore, if God is so engaged in the spiritual lives of others, then how can we as believers not be spiritually engaged. Jonah should have been engaged with those on the ship. He should have been a source of blessing and hope. Instead, he was the cause of their doom.

May we have open eyes, hearing ears, and a tender heart to the needs of those around us.

3. An unbeliever is hopeless without the spiritual investment of a believer.

...Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish. – Jonah 1:6b

The pagan captain was enough of a theologian to recognize that God's help largely comes through the spiritual investment of His people. When the Lord intends to do something in a person's life or among a people, He always moves first among His people. I do not understand why the Lord works this way. Sometimes it seems that things would work better and be more efficient if He worked outside the reach of His people, but He has chosen otherwise. He has called His people to invest in others. How so?

- God calls believers to invest in others through prayer.
We are called to pray for the needs of others. God's activity runs on the rails of the prayers of His people. There is no doubt that He does not need our prayers. He is not like the gods of mythology who are strengthened through prayers. No, He is omnipotent! God, however, invites us to participate in His activity among others by praying on their behalf.
- God calls believers to invest in others through proclamation.
We are commissioned to go and tell. God could do a much better job proclaiming the gospel than we do, but He has chosen to share His love and grace through His people.

Read Romans 10:13-15.

There are other ways to invest spiritually in people, but these are the two most profound ways to do so. Jonah had an opportunity to pray for his shipmates who were fearful and preach the gospel to men whose hearts were soft and pliable. He chose to be silent. He missed a great opportunity and put them in greater danger.

How can we remain alert so as to not miss opportunities to invest spiritually in others?

Three Alert Actions

- 1) Stay close to God in order to stay clean before God.

Jonah was running away from God's presence, so it should not surprise us to learn that no one recognized him as a prophet of God. Running from God creates a guilty distance between you and God. It is a fact that when you are not walking with Him but rather walking in sin, you will not be inclined to spiritually invest in others.

- 2) Pray for the spiritual and physical needs of others.

Prayer opens your eyes to needs and opportunities. It engages your heart with God's heart. Therefore, when a need arises, you are ready to rise and go.

If you will begin to pray now for your lost family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, teammates, and others, then you will eventually have an opportunity to share the gospel with them. If you never pray, then I doubt you will ever be ready to share.

- 3) Share the gospel with others.

In order to move, the rubber has to meet the road at some point. The wheels have to turn. If we are going to be Christians who make an eternal investment in the lives of those around us, we have to open our mouths and preach the gospel. We cannot sleep our way through life while people around us perish and meet a devil's hell.

Sharing the gospel is not difficult. Many times, the problem is that we over-think it. The gospel is explaining what Jesus has done for sinners and how it has changed my life. Yes, it is important that we be able to articulate the gospel and help people understand it. However, the greater importance is just sharing it. When Jesus healed a blind man in John 9, the Pharisees questioned him about it and accused Jesus of being a sinner. The response from this new believer was simple: *“Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see”* (John 9:25). He began with his testimony. What if we began there? What if we began to talk with others about what the Lord is doing in our lives?

Conclusion: There is a lot of unrest in our world today. Terrorists are regaining control of a land that we fought over for twenty years. There is a fear that terrorism will once again become a prominent global threat. The corona virus continues to terrorize people around the world and here at home. People are scared to death about dying. In addition to these terrorizing things, there are growing racial, gender, and sexual divisions taking place in our culture. Wokeism is infecting all aspects of our culture. Does it not feel like life as we know it is spinning out of control? What word of encouragement and hope do we have to offer people of our generation? As Billy Graham has reminded us, we are responsible for our generation. We have the gospel. We need to live it, invest it, and understand that God uses us to bring it to others. It is the hope people need.

What in your life has the Lord put His finger on today? As a Christian, has He revealed an area of sin that needs to be confessed and repented? Will you listen and obey, or will you run and hide? Running is futile. Ask Jonah about it. If the Lord has revealed an area in your life, He stands ready to forgive and cleanse.

Maybe, today you recognize your need for Jesus as Lord and Savior. You know that you are broken, and you understand He can restore the broken areas of your life. What is keeping you from rising and coming to Jesus?

Good news: God loves you. He created you and desires to know you.

Bad news: You are a sinner in rebellion against your Creator.

Best news: God has done everything necessary to justly deal with your sin and bring forgiveness and restoration to your life. Today, He calls you to turn from your sin and self and turn to Him as Savior and Lord. Have you received forgiveness in Christ?

Let's no longer run from God. We have had enough of His disciplining hand. Let's turn to Him in faith and repentance.