

Life at the Bottom of the Boat

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Book of Jonah

1 December 2019

My exhortation, I suppose, could be summed up by the second verse of that hymn [40] that he restores our souls and makes us walk within the paths of righteousness, even for his own Name's sake, and it's based on Jonah.

While we realise that the Bible has the habit of being surprising, Jonah's life is so well known to us that as we travel his familiar road, the wheels of our minds run in well worn grooves, but the road leads directly to our consciences. As we will read Jonah over the next couple of days, we notice all the symbols, a multitude of nations in the sea, we see that sea in turmoil, a loose collection of believers at various stages of understanding God in that boat, the going down into the water and coming back up again and the specially prepared circumstances that God brings on his his called.

Jonah's Calling

So Jonah gets a call from God, and God tells him that there's a city that's fallen into disarray, and all cultures and empires are always falling into disarray. As the world revolves, the vitality of the early pioneers, dies, prosperity arrives and comfort and trade and commercialism, questions of survival become questions of taste, and the culture wastes away morally, and that's entropy. It's one of the most fundamental laws of the universe as we know, so the individual in that culture plays in this relationship between culture that is corrupt, and the solution, and we're always witnessing disarray, we're always in opposition to it, you and I. So the question becomes, what do we do about this corruption? And we have to make a choice about our actions when we see this corruption and disorder all around us. And we can either do nothing, and let the corruption continue, which is sometimes wise, or we can become corrupt as well, we can go along with it, and then everything gets more corrupt, there's no influence for the better. So nearly all the time our answer is to follow the examples of the faithful and stand up for truth against corruption and decay. That's the only way the arrow may briefly point in the other direction, for being the change we would like to see in this world, not by confronting or opposing evil, but by setting an example. As Jesus says in John 13:

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you

Or in Matthew five:

You've heard that it was said, Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Embarrassment

So God threatens to destroy the city because of its corruption and the more corrupt the society, the less productive, and we see that all around us, the deliberate lawlessness of Socialists and left-leaning authorities, by any means necessary they want to achieve their ends. We stand aside from all of that. There's only one way that's necessary for us. The trouble is so did Jonah, Jonah said, I don't want to go, no way, he argues with God. Why should *I* get involved? Why *me*? These are our enemies after all, they're not Children of God. So he's still at home and hasn't left yet, and he's thinking to himself that God is a gracious and compassionate God, He's slow to anger and abounds in love, a God who relents from sending calamity so he'll probably let them off anyway, and I'll look like a fool going there, preaching punishments and fire and judgement when it will never happen anyway. He says,

Now, Lord, take away my life, for it's better for me to die than to live

looking forward to what would happen. I'd rather not go there and suffer the indignity and embarrassment of witnessing for you, when none of the things I will be threatening will probably happen anyway. So Jonah thinks more highly of his own comfortable life than potential inconvenience of preaching to a city miles away, where he doesn't know anyone, has no skin in the game as it were, they're not his own people they're in fact, enemies of Israel, and he has to go through a potentially hazardous sea journey to get there.

So he's a Hebrew prophet of God sitting pretty, he knows he's okay and who these others they has to leave his home to help at his own cost. So his reaction, rather than getting involved, is to jump on a ship and go to Tarshish, which is the other side of the world as far as he was concerned.

Fight or Flight?

If you get a call from God to oppose corruption and you decide to run and you jump ship and sail out into the Straits of Gibraltar, all you'll see is the wide open, boundless sea, unexplored, so you don't go in that direction. You follow a safe route in your attempt to flee, that other people have travelled before you. A place near the shore, a place with many comforting ports of commerce, of trade, of interest. And you travel as far away as you can get by the most comfortable route, and in the end perhaps, you'll be so far away God might give up and choose somebody else instead. So you get to be a child of God. But you get to be somewhere inconsequential, and it's your own private journey. It won't cost you to do what God wants. In fact, it would be quite comfortable as you run away. And it's exactly what *we* are facing today in society, in many ways. Our reactions to God's calling, in our

jobs, in our fellowship, our families, our interactions with people when things aren't quite right and we're being opposed and our beliefs are being opposed more and more.

So we must ask ourselves, what is our reaction? What do we do about this confrontation between God's calling and the difficulty that we would face if we really took it seriously? Well, what did Jonah do about it? Do *we* do that? Do we step up and make our beliefs known and walk bravely into the city? Generally not, we're quite politically correct aren't we. We keep our views to ourselves rather than opening a can of worms, for the most part, we might avoid the situation. We might be mealy-mouthed I suppose, we do just like he did, and I count myself among this number, we generally go the safest most comfortable route to a place of safety, rather than walking into the city as it were.

But wherever we go, so the saying goes, 'wherever you go, there you are'. You can't escape yourself, your life, your relationship with God, or anyone else. You can't run, just as Jonah found out. Neither can you go along with the corruption in a quest for comfort and prosperity. When you encounter power plays at work or back biting or snide remarks or gossiping and you see the corruption take hold. What *do* you do? Well, first of all, you think if that were just to change, everything would be okay. If only *they* would change, but they don't change, and you remember the last conversation you had with someone similar that didn't go well. You remember the leaflets you delivered that didn't yield any results or the special effort you put on that was wasn't frequented. Maybe you even got in trouble for standing out, you were maybe bullied and despised by your peers as not being inclusive enough or too judgmental, too old fashioned or your beliefs were considered poisonous, and this is our story. The story of how we approach corruption and lust and dishonesty or any values that are not God's wherever we find them, is the story of all those who know God, but who have to live with corruption inside and outside.

Well, we are in a place where things seem to be going okay. Things seem to be working out pretty well. Just as Jonah was in the boat on his voyage, and then something happens. A storm brews up and it knocks us off balance and we fall, and we quickly find ourselves in chaotic waters. We have to reach rock bottom darkness before we are able to emerge, and when that time comes for us to emerge, we're no longer the *us* that was submerged, we're a *renewed* person, we are a better us, with a better aim and a stronger resolve. So the problem Jonah had, and that we have now is that the calling of God doesn't come with guidelines. God doesn't *request*. It was Jonah's *purpose* to obey and to reject his own self? It was the reason he was created, and it's the reason we are created.

Life at the Bottom

The *command* from God is hard to approach because of what it means for us and Jonah didn't want to do it either. It was *necessary* for him to oppose the corruption in the city, and we don't want to completely submit either, as a five minute conversation with our conscience will reveal. So God sends a wind that threatens to tear the ship apart, but Jonah goes below despite the danger and the frantic actions of the terrified crew throwing everything they care about most in the world overboard, Jonah is down in the bowels of the ship in a deep sleep of rejected spirituality, living at the bottom of that boat. God's plan for Jonah on hold,

he thinks. Well, who knows? Let's be generous. Maybe he's so faithful. He doesn't worry about the storm, but I think if we're honest, it's more likely he is in a deep sleep of obstinate repression.

Despite the violence of the waves God has prepared, Jonah's still not budging. He wanted to die anyway, after all, and far better to die down there than go to the effort of fighting the storm, and who knows, if he survives then he'd have to go and obey God and publicly humiliate himself in Nineveh. Jonah doesn't care about his life if his life means *that*. So God confirms his actions and he is in a deep sleep, a metaphor for the living death that goes along with the death wish he already had, his conscience is dead.

But the captain isn't having any of it. He forces him to wake up, and we can imagine him shaking him awake or squeezing out the water from his shirt onto Jonah's his face. 'Wake up and call on your God before we die'. Whatever Jonah had decided about rejecting God's calling, it was clear that those around him had no hope, and were prepared to ask *anyone*, even the God of Jonah, for help, and it's now that Jonah gets a foretaste of the meaning of having a relationship with the Living God, and to see who's responsible they draw straws and Jonah gets the short one, and they ask him, 'Who are you and what have you done?'

I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord Yahweh, the God of heaven who *made* the sea and *made* the dry land.

We Are God's

In other words, I admit it. It's my God that's in control of everything, and that's the moment when Jonah realises that he's probably in control of me as well. I haven't got a hope of giving him the slip.

So as we read in look 21:

on the Earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and the tossing of the sea, and people will be fainting from terror, apprehensive of what's coming on the world and the political heaven's will be shaken

We know those words very well. This is our situation today. We can see it in the news, everywhere, all over the world. Apprehensive. Well then those around *us* will want hope and they may even ask us if they know that we're different. How are you so calm? Call on your God. Perhaps he will save us, or words to that effect: 'What do you believe?' We are in a time of unprecedented opportunity. It's a sobering thought that occurs to us, as the world gets it even more wrong, and they move to a point where as the Bible says, no life will survive. We won't be there. We won't be able to witness to them *then*. God will have taken us away, so we won't be around to help them out then, the chance to help those we know around us is a chance given to us now. We see the signs of the coming of violence, *now* is the time to make our voices heard, especially to those who are apprehensive of the storm around them.

Fine. So they might not believe you. Fine. So it might be embarrassing or uncomfortable or out of our comfort zone, or we might not be good at it. Fine. So they're not like us. They're

different. They have different gods. We wouldn't know how to speak to them. God might save them anyway. But it's not for us to run from our calling.

And now Jonah, aware of God's supremacy now and convicted of his own inadequacy in the face of God, asks to be thrown overboard. In other words, what's left for me apart from judgement. But they don't want to do it. Instead, they struggle uselessly towards the shore against the towering waves until they're completely exhausted, and finally they ask, What shall we do? *Shall we* do that? And reluctantly, they beg God that he doesn't hold it against them, and they toss him into the ocean and resigned to judgement from God he sinks beneath the waves. But Jonah hasn't counted on the most important thing, although *he* may have rejected his destiny and *he's* gone of the map and *he* feels his life has no meaning. It's not his life, and it's not his destiny to give up. It's God's. God has a plan which involves him and he won't let him off the hook so easily. When we don't forgive ourselves, we're not let off the hook by that. We still have a purpose and a mission. We all fail and perhaps in our ease and comfort today we have to some extent abandoned some of that initial verve and enthusiasm that we had not just at the beginning of our baptism, but at the beginning of the founding of the fellowship. Perhaps just to through virtue of us living in such a time of commerce and trade and luxury, we have to some extent begun a voyage of our own, in the privacy of our own trade and commerce. Perhaps it's easier for us to give up on being who we should be.

So the ease with which we accept this journey that we're on increases the probability that we are going to have to follow Jonah down into the depths, that probability is high. It happens to us all the time, in fact. But God isn't willing that any should perish, especially those who have been called according to His purpose. At our most uncomfortable moments when we find life so unfair, and we want to know from our brothers and sisters how we're going to survive and not fall into the sin of throwing it all away, then the specially prepared fish opens its mouth, and with unopposable strength swallows us whole and there is a still moment provided for reflection, usually tearful reflection. So Jonah, in the depths of despair and full of internal chaos, in totally unknown territory and no idea what to do, it's now pitch black and dead still. And it's not clear to us what will become of us sometimes, will we live out the rest of our lives in a sort of half-dead state until we're judged permanently. Unless in our weakness, we reach rock bottom, we perhaps have no job or no special other or something in our life has left us, perhaps we feel we have nothing to live for.

Unless we reach that purpose, which causes us to reach out to our Rock in a way that nothing can overcome - through prayer - and we examine ourselves and our choices through life, and our hopes for the future, and our doubts about our faith, our fears about our own sinfulness, or our ability to live the life God wants for us, or our lust and thoughts. In other words, unless we stop running from God, the waters will rise around us. Once we realise that God has called us, and has a purpose with us, which we can't deny, eventually we'll *have* to answer because he will call us again and again like he did Samuel, because it's His life and it's His purpose in you.

Preach

Only then, by reaching out in prayer when we decide to rise up and go back and renew our life, and stop evading and stop avoiding, and stop fearing to do what's right and find and winkle out those areas in our conscience, which we all know, and I'm speaking personally again, that we would like to change, to stop betraying ourselves and accept what God wishes for us God's life through us, *then* we can pray the prayer that Jonah prayed.

Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed. I will make good. I will say salvation comes from the Lord to anyone who's willing to hear. And the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Janah onto dry land.

and this time, when God asks him, Jonah goes into the massive city, a day's journey, a commitment, almost dead centre of where he should be, he hits his target. So what comes out of the chaos of this deep is a *new person* ready to submit to his destiny, or at least someone who's in better shape than before, and every time we go down and come back up, we are slightly refined, slightly more like the person we should be and slightly less like the person we were, we're transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Imagine a Renewal

So no sooner has Jonah started warning everyone about the judgement to come, but everyone *believes* him, they start fasting, and they even make the animals do the same, very unexpected, and we might ask why they believed him, and we can theorise about that, stories travelling quickly and and so, but who could deny that God had given them another start, and we would love that to happen to those around us, and we would love to be surprised unexpectedly by a renewal in the Truth.

Here we are, then, 2500 years later, reading words off a page about a man who wouldn't accept his destiny and felt it was up to him to avoid it, how the storm only stopped when he gave in, how he had to reach rock bottom before things started getting better, how when he got that call and he had that purpose in life, he learned: It's wise to answer, even if it's eventually. And somehow it all makes sense to us and we can learn directly from his example. We don't know what the fish was, we only have a dim awareness of his lifestyle, of what Ninevah looked like, but we understand the meaning of the story. Let your conscience be king in your life. Live the way you're called to live, and don't push away your purpose. Jonah ran so hard and so fast that God had to snap him back, and in a way that gave Jonah the certainty he'd been lacking all that time.

So the lesson for us sometimes, perhaps, is how do we begin each day. How do we live that perfect day? What's our purpose today? What should my decisions be with everything I have, all the capacity and capability I have, what should I do with my talents? These are very, very difficult questions, they might trouble you, they've certainly troubled me my whole life, they may trouble you as well. It's easier to run away, it's easier to avoid that calling, which is sometimes so hard to define, to feel you have right.

Don't Judge

But Jonah had even more to learn, and he had obeyed God now, but only in his self-righteousness. He felt special, one of the chosen ones, one of the believers, Jews. He believed that gave him the right to pronounce judgement on others, to be *'on God's side'* as it were, when looking at those God was speaking to, you know when you see a criminal or even someone perhaps in our own fellowship that has the appearance of being at fault, there is 'that person' that can be judged because of ... so and so. Yes, he prepared a comforting shelter and sat down to watch God's judgement on this 'other', like some kind of self righteous panoramic vantage point, he was to view the world from above, from outside.

Life hadn't been easy for *him* and he'd had to suffer much, to emerge this person, so why should these *others*, like the workers in the vineyard that were paid by Jesus the same for working only one hour, why should they have it so easy? They were guilty and just dressing in simple clothes and fasting was no reason perhaps, to save them. But this self comforting shelter wasn't enough because he began to feel discomfort again and God made a leafy plant grow up over him to provide shade and even now our slightly better than before hero becomes smug, feels smug. A miraculous plant proves God is with me and on my side, in my judgement I am with Him. And this green new life, this new, this new beginning, this provision of a blessing, this ease and comfort, he mistook for a confirmation his attitudes were correct. He still didn't really want or perhaps understand what God's mercy was about to accomplish, and all it took was a few caterpillars to make this this man, perhaps he was slightly unstable in this regard, turn him from happiness to sadness.

Be Humble

So if stability is measured by your own definition of the way you should live, of the rules which you've chosen to live by, rather than by God's truth or reality, then as we saw, it won't be long before this downward cycle happens again, and here we see Jonah annoyed that God was too compassionate. A man who wasn't able to make the transition from justice to mercy, from Law to love or from guilt to forgiveness. Such a man will always be limited, and we are, we struggle with all those things I'm sure.

So all the resentment he felt at having to preach the message of punishment to a people he feared God would forgive, came back to him, he became angry at the thought of those people asking him: 'well, you said that *this* would happen'. When we approach God's reality, we have to do it without reference to our own ego, without reference to our own expectations, but instead we must get to know God with humility in order to understand his surprising character. In this case, forgiveness.

The beginning of wisdom is to fear the Lord and acknowledge the Holy one is understanding

in secular terms, you must empty yourself, because without respect for a reality we can't comprehend, we will never be able to approach it.

We are Part of Something Bigger

And I have a small anecdote, which, which sort of shows a little of how we feel as we go

through our lives. I was recently behind the scenes at the Royal Opera House and upstairs there were 10 ladies studiously sewing costumes on tailors' dummies, and everywhere around me were racks of labelled completed costumes, labelled by the name of the show, the character and the scene, and everywhere I looked, there was careful evidence of careful attention to detail, of meticulous foresight and planning, of high level, top down orchestration, and this is a lesson for us too, when we're perplexed by the twists and turns of God's surprising mercy. When we're challenged to accept *His* plan in our life versus what we would like to happen and the hopes and aspirations we might have, we must understand that we can't take personal umbrage at the plan, even though it may not feel like it's going in the right direction. We each have to play our part. We're just individuals. We have no idea how God is orchestrating a huge number of people to *save* a large number of people. There should be no harsh judgmentalism of God's plan or any sense of unfairness in us. We should submit ourselves below, beneath the knowledge that God has it all in hand.

So this lesson of Jonah therefore, to have to hit rock bottom before he bounced back. You know, when you're called, you get up, you go into the city, and when you've done your bit, the next events have nothing to do with you. When we're talking inwardly to ourselves, trying to decide how best we can be, listen to the small voice, that invisible, powerless voice we allow ourselves to push away so often, the voice drowned out by the slightest noise. We struggle with ourselves to hear that voice that calls us, and we struggle to nurture and feed it, and it's got such power, hasn't it? Every decision you make, every question you have there it is, so easy though to... so curiously ignorable. If you find yourself becoming fearful about getting up and going into the city, remember that if you're fighting your destiny and your purpose and your calling, you're playing a part in your own descent into chaos and you'll kick yourself when you're down. It may take you years to get back on track. If you find fear in yourself when reading God's word, when listening to your conscience, that's the moment to confront. Perhaps if you don't feel you can do something that you know you should, perhaps keep it to heart, write it down, keep it in a safe place, and read it later.

It may seem odd to those who don't understand the significance of what we have on the table, but what we have here, the bread and the wine is in miniature the entire purpose of God's plan to save all those who want to hear his voice, to teach us to live like this man lived. Jesus makes it clear to us that:

whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

So out goes the challenge to us every week. We're privileged, not by blood like Jonah was, as a natural Israelite, but by water through baptism, but neither blood nor water is enough, we must be continuously born of the Spirit, we must be renewed, we must learn to *do* things of the Father. Only then will we really be respecting what Jesus has done.

Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you

The words that I have spoken to you, are Spirit

As we take the bread and wine. The lesson of Jonah is this, God is working with us too, now. If only we would hear his voice and be soft-hearted enough to act on it and do it, rejecting

whatever thoughts hold us back to ‘embrace the spiritual fight and skip the spiritual flight’.

Embrace the New Creation

Unless we want to return into the sea of chaos and darkness, the sea, as it were, of the world before creation began. Unless you want to be swallowed up by overwhelming circumstances that would be specially prepared by God to help us confront that living spiritual death until we decide to repent and rejoin God’s people with renewed dedication. There’s *that* option of going Jonah’s route, and the *other* option is of an option of commitment up-front, the confrontation of those feelings of embarrassment, the letting go of our judgement of others, every human being is made in the image of God, of recognising that God uses us to carry out his purpose here and now. And that option seems preferable if only we could lay hold on it with both hands.

God wants us to embrace the life he has for us *now*, enthusiastically, growing the grain for the bread, and producing the grapes from the True Vine so that when we’re harvested, we’ll all sit down with Jesus and eat a fellowship meal like no other in the life he’s prepared for us *later*.

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