

Life in the Storm

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Preacher: Hunter Nicholson

- [0 : 0 0] Jonah chapter 1. We've been going through a series on Jonah. We started last week, but we'll be going through Jonah for the month of May. And today, last week we saw how Jonah ran away, and this week we're picking up at verse 4.
- So we're going to read chapter 1, verse 4, to chapter 1, verse 16. Hear now God's word.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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. Then they said to him, Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us.
- [1 : 3 2] 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.
- 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.
- Then they said to him, What shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us? For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to 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. Nevertheless, the men rode hard to get back to dry land, but they could not.
- For the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. 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.
- [2 : 3 5] So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.
- Amen. This is God's word. So we're going to look at just one question this morning. And the question is, What is God doing in the storm?
- What is God doing in the storm? And that's a question that you can ask of this passage. It's also one of the major themes across the whole Bible.
- And it's a hard question. In fact, if you ever thought about it, the one book that's dedicated to that question is the book of Job. And Job never gives an answer to the question. Why the storm?
- What is God doing in the storm? It's hard to answer. What we can say is that the Bible never shies away from how serious suffering is in this life, and the fact that there are real storms to go through.

[3 : 37] And so there's different answers sometimes to why the storm. Sometimes God is showing us patience. Sometimes he's humbling us. Sometimes he never tells us why the storm comes.

And what we have to learn is just to trust him in the midst of the storm. But what you see in Jonah is three different ways that God can work through a storm.

Maybe not every time, but three different ways that sometimes God works in a storm. And that's what we're going to look at this morning. And the three things that he does. He wakes us up. He sends us searching.

And then lastly, he teaches us fear. That's what we're going to look at for the next few moments. And the first is that sometimes God works through the storm to wake us up.

Last week, we read about how Jonah ran away. And, you know, we left Jonah, and he was going as far away from the presence of the Lord as he could get, as far as that boat could take him.

[4 : 35] And immediately when we get to this passage, God has stopped all that. He has brought a storm into Jonah's life. And he's using the storm to intervene in Jonah's life, right?

And the storm is terrifying. It's dangerous. There's nothing inherently good about the storm. But the blessing that comes through the storm is that God uses it to wake Jonah up.

Technically, the storm doesn't wake Jonah up, right? It's the captain. And the captain of the ship comes to him and says, Wake up, you sleeper. Arise and call out to your God. And maybe it's just a coincidence.

But did you notice that the command that the sailor gives to Jonah, we've already heard before? What does the sailor say? He says, Arise.

Call out. And that's exactly what God told Jonah to do in verse 2. He says, Arise. Go to Nineveh. Call out against the people. And so a lot of people think that that's not a coincidence.

[5 : 37] That God is using the sailor to not just wake Jonah up from the storm, but to wake him up to the fact that this is a storm of his own making.

And you can look at that and you can say, how's that a blessing? Reminding someone of their faults and reminding someone of all their mistakes. How can that be a blessing? And the blessing is this, that God will no longer let Jonah live a lie.

He's no longer going to allow it. Jonah had tried to imagine that he lived in a world where God can speak to you and you can hide. He tried to imagine a world where the best thing you can do is get away from the voice of God.

Then you can live the life you really want. And God sends that crashing down all at once. And what he does is he brings Jonah back to a point where he confesses who his God is.

And you see that in verse 9. When the sailors are asking Jonah about where he comes from, he says, I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

[6 : 46] What happened to Jonah? Jonah, he got to the place in his life where what he believed, or what he at least at once believed, was he believed that God was the God of the land and the seas.

But he was living like that wasn't true. He was living like he could just get on a boat and get away from a God like that. And you get the impression that it would have taken nothing less than a storm like this to wake Jonah up.

And why does that matter to us? Well, one thing we can say is when we go through storms and we look up and we say to God, God, what are you doing here? Or we say, God, how can you bring something good out of this?

One answer could be that God can use the storm to wake us up. And that may be what God is doing. Because sometimes, and this happens all the time, maybe a little bit every day, right?

But so often, what we believe and the way that we practically live can diverge from one another. And that's what happened to Jonah. What he believed and the way that he lived were totally opposites. The pastor, Eugene Peterson, I heard him once talk about this passage and reflect on his own life.

[7 : 57] And he said that his wake up, you sleeper moment came to him early on when he was a pastor. And his young daughter came into his office one day and she said, Dad, can you read me a book?

And he told her, he said, I can't actually. Unfortunately, I've got a meeting tonight at the church. And she said, Dad, this is the 38th night in a row that you've had a meeting at the church.

Ouch, right? He was so busy, he wasn't even counting, but his daughter had counted every single night. And for Peterson, the storm was the fact that he had become so devoted to his work that his relationships were falling apart.

And his work had become his idol. And God used the voice of his little girl to wake him up to the storm that was happening in his life that was his own making. And, you know, Peterson, when he reflected back on this in his life, he said, he said, you know, I wanted to be the best preacher.

And I wanted to be a successful pastor. But ironically, that meant that that came at the cost of his own family and even of his own devotion to God.

[9 : 11] He was so busy with his work that he hardly thought about God every day. But God's mercy was in the storm because God was using God. Brought him to an awareness of the storm before the storm crushed him and called him back to himself with the voice of his daughter.

And now it's not just pastors, right? A storm like that can come to any one of us at any time. You know, we can believe the gospel and our lives can be moving in a very different direction from the gospel.

And sometimes God in his mercy brings a storm or he uses a storm that's in our life to wake us up to the fact that what we say we believe in the way that we're living are just not the same. And sometimes, not every time, but sometimes the best way to handle the storm is to simply say, God has used this to wake me up.

And I'm not going to use that. I'm not going to waste that wake up call. And before we move on to the next point, it's worth saying it is possible to be woken up and to waste the wake up call.

And you see that really tragically in the life of Judas. You know, Judas, do you remember how Judas betrayed Jesus? But if you read Matthew 27, Judas felt really guilty for what he had done.

[10 : 24] And he felt remorseful and he tried to return the money to the to the chief priests. He felt so guilty for what he had done. So in a sense, he had woken up to the storm that he had created.

But the problem was, ironically, his guilt drove him away from God, not to God. And eventually what happens, he becomes so guilty that he hangs himself.

But then you read the very same night what happens. Peter, Peter, who also betrayed Jesus, who had every right to feel so guilty for what he had done. And but when God wakes him up, he wakes him up to his need to run back to God, to his need to find grace in the hands of God.

And, you know, so it's one all that to say, waking up is not the end of the story. But but it can be the way that God in his mercy calls us to himself, that he he makes us alert and he says, come back to me and we can come back to him when we wake up.

Now, when you read this passage, we don't know what Jonah is going to choose. Right. We don't know whether Jonah in this moment feels so guilty that he wants to run away from God or whether he feels so guilty that he wants to run to God.

[11 : 37] And we'll find that out next week. But for the next few minutes, I want to look to the sailors. OK, because really, if you think about it, this passage is more about the sailors than it is about Jonah.

And God uses the storm for the sailors just as much as he uses it for Jonah. And the first thing that he does is he sends the sailors searching. That's how he that's one way that he can use the storm.

And if you think about it, imagine you're one of these sailors and you're you're on this boat and all of a sudden this divinely ordained storm comes up. It's about to destroy you. And you had nothing to do with it.

It wasn't your fault. This is Jonah's fault. And yet you're stuck on the boat. But how are they supposed to know that when this guy got on the boat that he was running away from the God of the heavens and the seas? Right. And yet what you see in this passage is that God can do more than one thing at a time.

He can work on Jonah. And in the very same storm, he can call these sailors to himself. And that's what he's doing. And the way that he does it is he makes through the storm, he makes the sailors ask questions that they never would have asked otherwise.

[12 : 44] He makes them reach out for something that they don't even know what they're reaching out for. So, you know, for most of the passage, the sailors are trying to get to the bottom of the storm.

Why is the storm coming? And so they cast lots to see whose fault the storm is. And, you know, someone who's not a Christian, who's not very religious, could look at this and say, how primitive, how primitive that these sailors in the middle of the storm try to handle it by rolling a pair of dice to find out who's what God is behind this.

And I don't think that's giving the sailors enough credit, because if you think about it, these are men who would have spent their whole life on the seas. They know what a storm looks like. And yet there's something about this storm that is so traumatizing to them that they say this this can't be natural.

There has to be something going on here. And that's what leads them to roll the dice. They say, we were sailors. We know storms. This is not a normal storm. So they roll the dice. They roll the lots and it lands on Jonah and they drill him with questions, five questions in a row.

Tell us on whose account this has come. What's your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country and what are your people? This sounds like someone who's in a panic, right? But all the questions are about questions of origin.

[14 : 02] Where are you from? And if you're in a storm and you're sitting next to someone, that's probably not the questions you're going to be asking. You're not wondering where's that person from. Save that for another day, right?

But the reason they're asking those questions is because, well, they're ancient people. And in the ancient world, where someone was from told you what God they worshipped.

And so when they say, where are you from? They're trying to get to the bottom of the question, what God is behind this? Because these are polytheistic men. So they have their gods.

But they're sure that Jonah has his God, too. And so they're asking these questions, trying to get to the bottom of what's going on. And they're not spiritual seekers. These are not religious men, necessarily.

They're not theologians who just love asking questions. But what's happened? God has put them in a crisis where they have to ask questions to survive. And one of the ways that God works through storms is by making us search, by making us seek in a way that we've never looked before.

[15 : 09] There was a fascinating article that came out two weeks ago on Easter Sunday by a young woman in the United Kingdom. And her article was called, Could I Become a Christian in a Year?

And she was writing it in a British newspaper that's basically kind of like the New York Times of Great Britain. And what the article was about was this phenomenon that she's been noticing as a woman in her 20s, which is that a lot of her friends, especially her male friends, who were not raised Christian, for some reason over the past few years have found themselves in church.

There seems to be this whole generation of young men who may have had no connection to the church before, but for some reason they're all showing up in different denominations, but they're all seeking religion, whether it's Catholicism or Protestantism or anything.

And the question is, why? What is the cause of this? The church that we were living, the church that we were at in Scotland before this, they're experiencing this same thing right now. And so her article is just saying, what's going on here?

And there's probably a lot of answers, but one of the answers that she points to is the pandemic. And there's not enough research to really know what's going on, but she pointed to a few statistics that showed that something could be happening.

[16 : 32] One of the statistics she pointed to was a really simple one, but she said Google searches for prayer were up by 30% during the pandemic all across the world.

Now, that may mean nothing, and it may not mean that anybody's becoming a Christian, but it seems significant. And one of the arguments that she was making is it seems like coronavirus was the kind of storm that made people begin to ask questions.

And the way that that's working itself out is that five years later, people who would have never stepped their foot in a church are showing up at church with what seems like no explanation, but it could be that God was using the storm of the pandemic to make people ask questions, to seek for something even though they didn't know what they were seeking for.

Sometimes God uses the storm to wake us up to what we already know is true, but sometimes he uses the storm to make us search for what we don't even know we're searching for, but he's pulling us to himself.

And if you're a Christian here, one practical prayer that can come out of that is to say, you know, we want our neighbors to be people who are seeking for something, who know that what they have is not all that there is, and they're looking for some kind of religion to hang on to, because we believe that Christianity offers a hope that no other religion offers.

[17 : 56] And one of the things that we can pray for ourselves is, God, would you make us a church? Would you make us a people that when people come to us with questions, you've equipped us with answers.

And when someone can say, you know, maybe without saying it like this, but they come and say, I'm looking for hope, we can point them in the right direction. And there's a whole list of questions you can ask on the back end of that.

Like, you know, if someone showed up at our church today, not even knowing what they were looking for, but they weren't Christian, how intelligible would this service be to them?

How intelligible would the things that we say about Jesus be to them? Could they make sense of it at all? Or in the way that they were treated when they showed up here, would they say to themselves, you know, I don't understand what that tall guy up front was saying, but the people were nice.

And I can see that there's something here that's worth sticking around and asking questions about. Are we ready to answer people's questions when God lifts them up? So that's going on in the storm sometimes.

[19 : 00] God's calling people to ask questions. But lastly, the last way that God works in the storm is he teaches us fear. This passage is covered with fear from beginning to end.

It opens with the sailors being afraid. And did you notice that it also ends with the sailors being afraid? But in between the two fears, everything has changed. And obviously at the beginning, they're afraid of the storm.

But if you see, by the time you get down to verse 10, it says they become exceedingly afraid, but it's not because of the storm. It's because they realize what is behind the storm. This is bigger than a storm.

This is about the God of the storm. And imagine if this was you. They realize they're on a boat with a man who is in open rebellion against the God of the heavens and the seas.

It's like realizing that you are harboring a fugitive and the FBI shows up at your door. They're terrified. And there's this great irony to the way that the sailors act here, which is that they act righteous in almost every way that they can.

[20 : 11] So Jonah is this prophet who doesn't want to bring any kind of mercy or any kind of news to foreign lands. And yet the first foreigners that you meet in this passage, they're exemplary.

They do exactly what you would hope when someone comes face to face with the God of Israel. And so just in verse 12, for instance, Jonah tells them, he says, if you want to calm the storm down, throw me in the water, kill me.

Right. And did you notice that they don't do it at first? It says instead, nevertheless, the men rode hard to get back to dry land. And a lot of most people agree who study this.

They say these men already had such reverence for whoever this God was, the God Yahweh, that they would not dare kill his prophet.

They thought that that's what the storm was for. And so they refused to throw him overboard because the last thing they wanted was to have blood on their hands in the face of this God. And so they didn't want to kill Jonah until finally Jonah says, this is the only way.

[21 : 13] You've got to throw me overboard. So eventually they throw Jonah overboard, but only after praying to the God for forgiveness for what they're going to do. And then you get to verse 16, the last verse of the passage.

It says, the men, they feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. Isn't that amazing? This is a story about Jonah.

And yet, even as the Lord is dealing with Jonah, he's also dealing with the sailors by teaching them to fear him. And sometimes what we need most in the middle of the storm is to remember the fear of God.

And that's an easy thing to misunderstand. I was thinking, when I was preparing this, I was thinking about all the times that we say, you know, maybe when someone who's a senior person yells at a younger person, and they'll say, I put the fear of God on that boy.

Right? And it just means I made that boy terrified so that he would never do wrong again. And that's not quite what, the fear of God is different from any other kind of fear in this world.

[22 : 23] And until you understand that, you can't appreciate what it means to fear God and why that might actually be good news. So let me give you just a definition of what the fear of God means.

The fear of God, it's a natural and appropriate response. It's the natural and appropriate response to God's power and his holiness. So it's just, when you see God for who he is, it's the instinctive response that you have.

When you see how great he is and how literally awesome he is, how he is, he fills us with all. And when you see that and you realize how small you are.

But it doesn't stop there. What makes biblical fear different from every other kind of fear is, you know, every other thing that you're afraid of in life, you're trying to get away from it. Right? But the fear of God is, strangely, this kind of fear that when you have it, the more you have it, the closer you want to get to the object of your fear.

You fear God and you want to get closer and closer to him. And so there's two things happening at one time. And that's why this is, because at once you realize how powerful and holy God is.

[23 : 33] And yet you also get this sense that you can trust this God, that he's not vindictive, that he's someone that you can shelter under because of his power. And, you know, maybe I talked about fear about a year ago and several people came up to me afterwards and said, the obvious illustration here is a healthy father-child relationship.

Right? Where, you know, when you're a kid, your dad is the strongest person you know. And in a sense, you fear him because you know that he has the power to discipline you.

But at the same time, if it's a healthy relationship, you're also drawn to him because you know that you can trust him and that everything he does is for your good. That's what, that's a shadow of the fear of God.

But the best illustration, I think, in all of scripture of the kind of fear of God that we're talking about here comes from the New Testament, whenever Jesus calms the storm. And I say that because it almost parallels this story exactly so much so that people think that when Mark wrote about Jesus calming the storm, he was thinking about what happened to Jonah.

Because think about it. In the story where Jesus calms the storm, what happens? Storm comes up. Sailors are afraid. They go and find the one man that's sleeping.

[24 : 55] And they wake him up and get on to him saying, why are you sleeping in the midst of a storm like this? And then what happens? The man who was asleep calms the storm. Jonah, but in very different ways, right?

Jonah calmed the storm by being thrown into it. But Jesus calmed the storm by speaking to it with a word. But the other thing that they have in common is both stories begin and end the same way.

They both begin with the men in the boat being afraid of the storm. And they both end with the men in the boat being afraid of God. The sailors suddenly are filled with fear of the God of this storm.

And when Jesus calms the storm, if you remember, it says, after he calmed the storm, the disciples were afraid. But they keep following Jesus because it's not the kind of fear that you think about when you're scared of something.

It's the kind of fear where you realize they look at this man they've been following for so long and they realize the man who's in the boat with us is more powerful than the storm that has been terrifying us for these past few hours.

[26 : 01] They get a glimpse of Jesus' holiness, of his awesomeness. And when you see that, that changes you and it changes the way that you walk through a storm, right?

Because you realize in every single storm, if God is really sovereign, then the storm is never the most powerful thing in our lives. There's always a God over the storm who can work in the midst of the storm however he chooses to.

And that's what the sailors realize. That's why they worship. That's why they fear God at the end because they find something greater than the storm at the end of the story. So the last word today is simple.

In your storm, can you see the one who's greater than the storm? And then beyond that, in your storm, can you see how God can be merciful even in the midst of the storm?

And how our darkest day can actually be the way that God is pulling us to himself. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your gospel. Help us to be like these sailors who are seeking your face, maybe not even knowing it sometimes.

[27 : 15] Lord, help us to fear you with a fear that fills us with awe, but also a fear that fills us with trust. That even in the darkest night, that you're with us and that you're working.

In your son's name we pray. Amen.