

Jonah 1:4-16

With Jonah in the Ship

1. Introduction

In chapter 1:4-16 we read about how things are progressing with Jonah at sea. It turns into a nightmare. This part of Scripture begins and ends with the Lord. He controls this story from beginning to end. Jonah only comes into the action later. He has withdrawn himself from the company of the sailors, who have to bear the brunt of the storm God sent for Jonah.

The only thing that the Lord does is to send a strong wind. A storm begins to brew and increase in violence. By sending a storm in this way he destroys all the confidence of experienced sailors. But what is the Lord's goal? Is he determined to destroy Jonah? Why does he involve innocent people? Are they better people as a result? What is the role of the sailors in this story?

2. Text notes

Verse 4

The Lord responds to Jonah's desertion. The word sequence in the original text emphasizes God's response. God now begins to oppose him. He does not just let his servant go. He "hurled a violent wind on the sea." (NASB/RSV) The word "hurled" suggests that the storm develops suddenly. He surprises the ship's crew. There are other indications of this suddenness. Experienced sailors know how to predict bad weather. They can then try to reach the coast in time. In days of old, ships sailed along the coast as much as possible (cf. v.13). Yet here we see no such effort.

Verse 5

When the storm suddenly comes upon them, the sailors become afraid. They realise there is more to the storm than meets the eye. Possibly some god or another is angry with them, which is why each one pleads to his own god. It seems as though the crew is composed of various nationalities. The seamen throw their cargo overboard. They do not do this to give an offering to the gods, nor primarily to "lighten the ship", per our translation. Rather, they do this to "*lighten it for them.*" We think this is the best translation of the original text. This is an emergency; the crew is under great pressure. In order to bring some relief, they throw their cargo in the sea. By doing this they decrease the risks and give themselves more room to maneuver.

Jonah, in the meantime, is lying somewhere in the hold, asleep. He has fallen into a deep sleep. Compare Genesis 2:21, for example. There a derivative of the same word is used. Adam slept so deeply that he did not notice how God removed one of his ribs. We read the same of Abraham (Genesis 15:12) and of Saul and his men (1 Samuel 26:12).

Verse 6

The captain brings Jonah back to the harsh reality. Irritated, he wakes the prophet and calls: "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god!" Through an

unbeliever, God points Jonah to the seriousness of his flight but also to the way of possible salvation - prayer.

“Maybe he [your god] will take notice of us.” That means, “Maybe this god will intervene and save us.”

Does Jonah listen to the words of the captain? The writer tells us nothing about this. This omission suggests that Jonah did not listen. All the attention in this part is focused on how Jonah reacts to what the Lord causes to happen to him. How would it even be possible to pray to God and still refuse to serve him?

Verse 7

Casting lots is a very well known activity. It was, and still is, used by many world religions to receive a divine answer or decision. People also used it in Israel (e.g. 1 Samuel 14:42; Proverbs 16:33). Lots were also cast in the New Testament congregation (Acts 1:26). Even today it plays a (limited) role in the choosing of office-bearers.

Verse 8

“Who is responsible for making all this trouble for us?” It is strange after verse 7 to read these words again in verse 8, since the answer to the question is already known. That is why the men had just cast the lot. What is the point of this repetition? It is possible that they are meant to be an explanatory note for the same words in verse 7. Perhaps it was for that reason that they were originally placed at the end of verse 7. In the original text there is only a small difference between the words of verse 7 and verse 8. Verse 8 could then be an explanation for the reader if verse 7 was unclear. Later, this comment was added to the wrong place in the text. If the reader does not accept this solution, then he must seek another. For example, maybe the sailors wanted to hear from Jonah himself that he was guilty, or that they did not immediately want to brand Jonah as the cause of the difficulties. For them, he is the man who can solve the riddle.

“What do you do?” It seems likely that the crew is not really interested in Jonah's occupation but in the reason why he is on a journey. What is his commission? Maybe this has a connection with the wrath of his God. The constant questioning gives an indication of the tension on board.

Verse 9

“The Lord, the God of heaven...” Israelites use this title often when they are taking about God in the presence of heathen people (cf. Daniel 2:37, 44). It expresses the omnipotence and absolute power of God. This is also how God was known in foreign countries during the Persian rule (cf. Ezra 1:2; 6:9).

“...who made the sea and the land.” With these words Jonah makes a clear connection between God, himself, and the storm. The God whom he serves had indeed unleashed this storm. The sea is his.

Verse 10

“What have you done?” Considering what has proceeded, this can hardly be a request for information. It is therefore more like a call of dismay. “How is it possible

that you are fleeing from this God!" Jonah had told them what he had done. Therefore a better translation is: "How could you do this!" (NASB) The Lord makes the same exclamation to Eve, shortly after the fall (Genesis 3:13).

Verse 11

"What should we do to you..." Time is of the essence. The sea becomes more and more violent. Something must be done with Jonah because he is the cause of all this trouble at sea. To do something to him on their own initiative is too risky, since he is a servant of God. They do not yet know enough about this God. By acting too hastily they could easily increase his wrath. Let Jonah decide what they must do to him. He knows his God the best.

With this question the Lord again forces Jonah to choose his position in relation to Him. Will he bow the knee now or will he remain unrelenting in his refusal to obey, accepting all the consequences of that refusal?

Verse 12

Jonah answers "throw me into the sea ... and it will become calm." He cannot take his own life, so he does not jump into the sea himself. The others must do the dirty work. Jonah knows that he has caused the storm. He cannot avoid the Lord, yet he does not want to go to God's intended destination. He would rather die. By choosing this course, he believed there was a chance that the crew would be saved.

Verse 13

The sailors have a difficult decision to make. Although Jonah is casual about his own life, it is not easy for them. What should they do? Throw Jonah in the sea and save themselves? This course of action might work, but they cannot be sure. The wrath of God could turn even more against them. That is why they desperately try another way – they row towards the land.

Things do not go their way. The sea becomes even more tempestuous. The words "against them" (NASB) are added this time, in contrast to verse 11. The storm now also directs itself against the intentions of the crew members. The Lord cuts off every possible way of escape. Jonah must choose: bend or break, on your knees before God or overboard. There is no other way.

Verse 14

"Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man." The sailors are afraid to lay hands on Jonah, yet they are forced to throw him overboard. Shall the Lord not count this as murder against them? Jonah has done nothing to them, after all. They feel fear and awe for God. Let the Lord not regard this as unrighteous bloodshed. Let him not punish them for murdering his servant.

"For you, O Lord, have done as you pleased." These words can be explained in different ways. As they are translated here, the sailors feel obliged to throw Jonah overboard. Their backs are against the wall. They do what the Lord forced them to do. Another possible translation could be "because you are Yahweh, you do as you will." (cf. Psalm 115:3; 135:6) That is, "God does as he pleases." Therefore the crew begs the Lord not to hold them responsible for Jonah's death.

Verse 16

"The men greatly feared the Lord..." This chapter nicely describes how the Lord brings them to this point. The word "feared" is used repeatedly but with different nuances. As the storm becomes more tempestuous, panic seizes the hearts of the crew. They become "afraid." (v.5) This fear deepens into an anxious awe for the greatness of God. They were "terrified." (v.10) This happens as a result of Jonah's confession, "I fear the Lord" NASB, v.9. When the sea calms down they "greatly fear the Lord." That means: "with reverence they thank God for the salvation he brought."

"They offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him." Do they make this offering immediately aboard the ship? What sort of promises do they make? It is unlikely that they made an offering on the ship. You make promises in a crisis situation and before an offering, not after. Therefore it is better to translate this verse as: "they made a sacrifice to the Lord, since they had already made vows." On the grounds of the vows made previously (in the storm) they make an offering to the Lord (cf. Psalm 116:17,18) Where and when this offering happened is not recorded. It is likely that it happened later on land.

3. Comments for today

1. In this part of the Bible we see the Lord wrestling to bring about the repentance of his servant Jonah. He blocks his escape in every thinkable way. He does not just let his servant go. He holds Jonah ever more firmly. The same is true today. God remains active also with his children who turn away. He obstructs their way in order to shepherd them back, or he lets them go their own way for a time in order to show them what the consequences of that way can be. He does not let go easily.

On the other hand, there is a limit. Look at Jonah's situation, which becomes more and more unfavourable. If you keep choosing *for* evil, you can be given over *to* evil. That is how serious dealings with the Lord are.

2. If we choose to run away from our service to the Lord, serious consequences follow. Those consequences not only have a negative influence upon our own dealings with the Lord, they also affect those around about us. They sit with us in the same boat, so to speak. Our service is in many areas. If Jonah quits, Nineveh would have to do without him. Then God's message would not reach the city. Jonah could no longer be a blessing to the people of the Lord (cf. 2 Kings 14:25). Many others would suffer the consequences of his quitting. While the service of the Lord unites people and creates community, sin isolates, breaks bonds and ruins relationships.
3. Jonah answers the sailors' questions. Then he confesses his faith. They ask his identity. Jonah finds it more important to show who his God is. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." Yet coming from Jonah, these words have a somewhat technical ring. It is "worship" without godliness. No awe can be heard in these words. His fear of God does not show itself in repentance and conversion. Jonah's behaviour clashes with what he says. His declaration comes close to indicating a nominal faith, just like somebody today saying, "I am Protestant." Jonah lets the sailors know into which

category he must be placed, religiously speaking. Is that attitude a problem with us as well? Do we talk about God in terms of our religious identity? Confessing God's name is more than only knowing your confession, although the first cannot exist without the second. It is also more than stating which church you attend on a Sunday. Your life must support your confession. It will never be enough to say "I am Reformed." People must clearly be able to see what that confession means in your life.

4. Jonah's confession is very simple. Yet God's name is mentioned on the ship. It appears to be enough to make heathen people worship God. Even with such a weak witness, God is able to bring them to their knees. God uses us as his instruments to spread his gospel, but the result comes from him. It does not depend on us. He knows how to reach his goal in spite of our shortcomings.
5. We must be careful not to make a too simplistic judgment of Jonah. Here is a man who stands up against the almighty power of God. Inside he is torn between what he does and what he knows, and yet he stubbornly keeps to his desertion.

That attitude is recognizable for anyone who has experienced how the service of the Lord can oppose his personal desires. What tension and uncertainty that can cause! How must I direct my life while I have so many (or so few) possibilities? How do I balance my career with the care of my family? With my place and responsibilities in the church? How must I deal with my own nature? (e.g. Exodus 3-4:17; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1:4-19)

Jonah longs for the peace of not having been called. This story truly teaches us that avoiding the call of God gives no real peace. In fact it creates more unrest. The Lord maintains his claim upon our lives. We only have true rest when we have learned to put our preferences aside, when we unfold our lives within the calling God gave us.

6. Jonah makes clear to the crew that he fears God. Their reaction is remarkable. For them it is unthinkable that somebody could try to flee from God. It is good to learn from this reaction. If people who do not know the Lord realize who the Lord is, they consider us to be crazy when we do not serve him with enthusiasm.

How can that be? Are we still amazed that he who created the heavens and the earth wants to have a relationship with us, wants to involve us in his plans? Do we find that hard to believe? If so, people who have come into contact with the Lord for the first time will confront us with it!

7. Walking away from the service of the Lord leads us towards a path of meaningless actions. The crew asks Jonah "What shall we do with you?" He answers "Throw me in the sea." He does not throw himself overboard. According to the letter of the law he cannot take his own life. Yet, at the same time he knowingly walks into death's open arms.

Resigning from your service of the Lord does not make your life blossom. Instead you destroy your life. You make wrong choices. Walking away from God's service takes away your ability to value your own life. You declare yourself to be an

outlaw. Taking your calling seriously helps you to value correctly the life you have received from God.

4. Summary

Two threads run through this Bible text. First there is Jonah. He knows the Lord well. Although the Lord so clearly confronts him, he moves gradually further away. The Lord confronts Jonah unmistakably with the consequences of his neglect of duty, but Jonah does not listen.

Next are the heathen sailors. They do not know who God is, but they come to know more and more of him. Although they have to manage with minimal knowledge, and although Jonah's attitude can hardly be seen as inspirational, they come at last to the worship of God.

It is good to note the way God uses Jonah in spite of himself, to make his name known to heathen people. On the other hand, the heathen crew is the means by which God confronts Jonah with the consequences of his neglect of duty and forces him to make a choice. God seeks Jonah through them.

5. Tips for introduction and study

1. Central to this Bible passage is how the Lord meets Jonah. Note how he encircles his servant. Show how God's wrath becomes visible in his actions, but also that it is his love which causes him to seek Jonah.
2. Consider how God's providence is displayed in the lives of Jonah and the crew. It would be very useful to read Lord's Day 9 and 10 alongside this passage. Also think about the form for baptism, especially where the meaning of being baptized into the name of the Father is explained. Compare other Bible texts such as Romans 8:28 and James 1:12-15.
3. Draw parallels between the redemptive work of Christ who consistently ignored every way of escape from his calling, and the way God troubled himself with Jonah.
4. This part of Scripture is full of contrasts. Jonah is constantly contrasted with the heathen sailors. Almost every verse in this section illustrates this. To deepen your insight into structure and meaning of this passage, look at the differences between Jonah and the sailors and list them. Note especially how Jonah and the crew behave differently in relation to the judgment of God and with the lives of themselves and each other.
5. Notice how easily the life of a child of God can clash with the name of the Lord he bears. You can discuss this from the perspective of LD 47.

6. Discussion aid

1. We know God through two means (BC, Art.2). How are these two ways of knowing God shown in this part of Scripture? What connection exists between the two? What place do they have in recognizing God's guidance in our lives?

2. What relationship is there between God's wrath and his love?
3. Does God's providence in the life of Jonah and the ship's crew reduce their own responsibility to their own lives? What about in our lives?
4. How does this Bible text relate to Christ? (cf. Luke 24:27)
5. Why is Jonah so clearly set in contrast with the heathen sailors?
6. In the light of this Bible passage, what do you think of the following statements?
 - Misfortune in your life is a blessing.
 - Recognizing your guilt is not the same as repentance.
 - Self-preservation and self-sacrifice are closely related.
7. What characterizes the fear of the Lord?
8. Is it worthwhile to discuss whether or not the sailors were unconditionally converted? Does this text talk about that? What is the meaning of the statement that they feared God and made offerings to him?

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