

The central question driving the book of Jonah is about how we respond to the mercy that God has for sinners. Last time, we looked back in Jonah's history to show that he and all Israel were the recipients of God's mercy when God restored all of Israel's territory to her even when she was mired in wickedness under King Jeroboam II. We then heard God's commission to Jonah to call out against the wickedness of Nineveh, another demonstration of mercy. But today, our focus is on the mercy that God shows to Jonah as an individual when in response to that commission, Jonah refuses to carry God's mercy to Nineveh and flees away from the presence of the Lord by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish, heading in the opposite direction of obedience.

So what is God's response to Jonah's sin? I've titled the message "Tempestuous Mercy", because when Jonah disobeys and flees, God hurls a violent wind after His runaway prophet, hiding mercy in the disguise of a great tempest. Another name for this sort of mercy is *discipline* or *correction* – when we sin and run away, God brings some hardship or suffering into our lives to alert us to the fact that we're heading in the wrong direction. What discipline does is give us a preview of our destination – if we complete our journey away from God, we will end up in a place of eternal suffering, separated from God forever – and so God in His mercy uses discipline to convince us to turn around and get back on the path that leads to life and joy in His presence.

So let's look at how that plays out in the life of Jonah. This powerful storm is God's merciful reply to Jonah's sin, and in our text today, we see four *wrong* responses to God's mercy before we finally see Jonah respond the right way.

The first wrong response is on the part of the sailors. The storm is threatening to break the ship apart, and so each sailor cries out to his god. Now, crying out to the true God is absolutely the *right* response, but the only person on board who knows the true God is running away from Him and causing the problem in the first place! The sailors are *right* to call for divine help; they just have the wrong gods.

For us, our idols come in disguise, but we can usually unmask them by looking at who you turn to first when something goes wrong. Where does your help come from? What do you trust in? Common idols in our day include politicians, armies, doctors, therapists, rules, and on and on. As John Calvin said, our hearts are idol factories – we're good at inventing and retrofitting idols.

Now, all of these things are good in their place – you ought to go see a doctor when you get pneumonia – The problem is when these created helps *leave* their place and push the Creator out of the center of your heart. Then, when God comes to rebuke your sin, you call out to the wrong god to save you, and a new law, a pill, a rule, or a therapy cannot quiet a mercy-storm!

The second wrong response also comes from the mariners when they start throwing the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Now, we shouldn't blame them too much for this, because in many storms, this would be the right response. But what's burdening the ship in this storm isn't the cargo. It's the runaway prophet. [CS Lewis: flood/fire extinguishers]

But we can make this mistake too, when God sends storms into our lives. We rush to clean up our act using spiritual life hacks and self-improvement techniques, when that really isn't the problem. So when God hurls His Great Spirit on you to prompt you to reach out to your neighbors with the gospel, and you decide to start tithing and catch up on your Bible-reading plan instead, you're just throwing the cargo overboard; you won't have peace until you deal with the real issue.

The third wrong response comes from Jonah. During all this excitement, Jonah is dead asleep down in the lower part of the boat. Notice that he's still headed *down*. He's trying to ignore the mercy-storm, by acting like nothing is wrong. I remember talking to someone who had stopped going to church, only to have the wheels come off of their life shortly thereafter – kids, marriage, house, car, everything started going wrong, but when I talked to them, I was stunned when they said that they were fine with not going to church because after they stopped going, things didn't seem any different! The reality was that everyone could see that their ship was sinking except for them. They were asleep in the bottom of the boat.

But here's something amazing in verse 6. Imagine that you're Jonah, and God says to you, "Arise, call out!" And instead of obeying, you run away and fall asleep, only to be startled awake by a loud voice saying, "Arise, call out!" The captain's words to Jonah are identical to God's commands that Jonah was trying to get away from! Jonah has to realize that God has followed him onto the boat. But in his stubbornness, he apparently still refuses to pray, probably because he already knows what God would say! See how badly sin messes things up: the only person *not* praying on the whole boat is the prophet of the Lord!

So the sailors cast lots, since everything else they've tried hasn't worked, and the lot (guided by God) chooses Jonah. Immediately they pepper him with questions, trying to diagnose what's gone wrong, and when he tells them that he fears Yahweh, the God of heaven, maker of the sea and dry land, they are terrified. He had already told them that he was fleeing from Yahweh (v.10), but it seems that up until now, they don't really understand who Yahweh is. But once they hear that Jonah is trying to flee *by boat* from the God *who made the sea*, they can't believe it: "What is this that you have done?" Jonah, what were you thinking?

Now, finally, they ask the prophet of the one who is responsible for the storm what to do in order to make it stop, since it keeps getting worse. Jonah prophesies that the storm will stop if they hurl him into the sea. And because this is such a famous Bible story, we sometimes miss the fact that this will surely mean Jonah's death. Jonah is telling the sailors to sacrifice him to the God's storm so that they can be saved. "Kill me," Jonah says, "and you will live." Now, this isn't an atonement: Jonah isn't paying for *their* sins; he's receiving justice for his sins. But it is a sacrifice that will save the sailors' lives. Jonah is willing to die so that these men might be saved. Despite his initial disobedience, we're starting to see why Jesus likes Jonah so much!

But the sailors are understandably hesitant to kill the prophet of Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. They don't want this powerful God mad at them, and Jonah hasn't really shown himself to be trustworthy. And so they give us the fourth wrong response to the storm: they try to row harder. And this wrong response might be the one that Christians are most tempted to fall into when facing one of God's mercy-storms. *Try harder*, so that God will forgive you. *Try harder*, so that God will take away the pain! But oh how wrong we are! The lesson of tempestuous mercy is *not* "try harder!" Your best efforts got you here, in the middle of the storm. The last thing you need is more of your best efforts! Stop rowing, believe God's Word, and cast yourself directly into the ocean of His mercy! That's what you need to do!

And so after the storm *intensifies* in direct response to their rowing, the mariners realize that they have no other choice. They call on Jonah's God, asking Him not to punish them for spilling the blood of His prophet, since this was not their desire, but a last resort thrust upon them by God Himself. In v.14 they say, "you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you."

And so just as God *hurled* a great wind upon the sea, the sailors *hurled* Jonah into the sea, and instantly, the storm stopped. From this, the sailors go from fear to exceeding fear, from the fear of the storm to the fear of Yahweh, and so they sacrifice sacrifices and vow vows. We don't know if this was a full conversion, but we do know that the fear of the Lord is at least the beginning of wisdom. God in His dangerous mercy has brought the fear of the Lord to a ship full of Gentiles through the disobedience of his prophet. And if that's the result of *disobedience*, what will the result of obedience be?

But Jonah at last has found the right response to God's mercy: don't ignore it, don't avoid it, don't try to earn it: just throw yourself into it! The mercy-tempest accomplished the work that God gave it to do. The thing is, at this moment, Jonah understands God's *mercy* to be God's *judgment!* He thinks that his punishment for running away is death, and he accepts that punishment as just and right. It's easier for Jonah to make peace with God's justice, even when that justice means his own death, than it is for him to accept the mercy of God.

It won't be until next time that Jonah understand that God's tempest has brought him mercy in place of judgment, and boy, is he going to have a strange teacher! God's mercy is about to swim up and swallow Jonah whole.

But before we meet the whale, I want to remind you of another prophet in another boat, going on a remarkably similar journey, but with a dramatically different conclusion. In Mark 4:35-51, Jesus gets in a boat, which soon faces a great windstorm that threatens to break the boat apart. Where is Jesus? Sleeping! And as soon as the prophet is awakened and takes action, the storm stops, the sea is calm, and those in the boat have their fear of death replaced by an even greater fear. Jesus revisits Jonah's voyage, but since Jesus is acting in obedience to God's plan, all He needs to do is *speak* to the wind and the waves, and they obey. God rewrites the Jonah story in the key of faithfulness, because a prophet greater than Jonah is here.

The lesson for us today is that God sends storms because of sin, but as Jonah learns, the storm is *mercy*, not punishment. What's scary to think about is not that God's storms will follow you in your sin, but to think that they might *not*. When you sin and no storm comes, that's not proof that God is gentle and gracious; that's proof that you've been abandoned by God and given over to destruction. A Father who doesn't discipline hates His son, but God's mercy is seen in sending this storm after rebellious Jonah.

And in response to God's tempestuous mercy, the story of Jonah teaches you that when storms of mercy overwhelm you, the way out is not ignoring the problem by sleeping in the bottom of the boat, or fixing the problem by rowing harder. The way out is by being thrown into the sea, casting yourself onto the mercies of God.

But the gospel goes even further than this. The story of Jesus in the boat changes the ending: Jonah's sacrifice previews Christ's sacrifice, but Jesus doesn't just *repeat* Jonah's example. The most fundamental lesson we need to learn is not that "self-sacrifice calms God's storms," but that "the mercy of God in Christ calms the storm."

So when you find yourself in the middle of a storm, before you throw yourself into the sea, remember that Christ has already sacrificed Himself to save you. Rest in Him first, and only then follow in His steps. God's storms are teaching you to stop running from God, and to cast yourself onto His mercy instead, not as a means of paying for your sins, but as a way of identifying with and following after Jesus. It's not your self-sacrifice that calms the storm; it's Jesus. This is hugely important to see, so that you don't get the wrong idea that God wants you to suffer before He will accept you back. No, Jesus has already atoned for sin, and you stand in God's favor by faith alone.

God wants you to link together the stories of Jonah, Jesus, and your own life, but He wants you to pay attention not just to the *similarities*, but also to the crucial *differences*. Like Jonah, we run from God. God in His mercy sends disciplinary storms after us, and He wants us to respond in the right way. Jonah's response was to submit to God's justice, only to be surprised by mercy. Jesus' response was one of faithful obedience, which enabled Him to calm the storm with a word. Your response must be to trust yourself to the mercy on God in Christ, who sacrificed Himself in your place on the cross so that mercy can be yours.

Maybe your storm is caused by your own sin. Running away looks like self-justification, refusing to hear correction, and digging in your heels. Throwing yourself into the storm of mercy involves the self-sacrifice of acknowledging your sin and repenting before God and those that you've sinned against. Trust that God has sent this storm in order to drive you to Christ, and make you more like Him, which means that this storm is full of mercy.

Maybe we're facing storms in the church and in our culture more broadly for the very same reason as Jonah: we've been given the responsibility to warn others of God's judgment against sin, and we've ducked and run instead of arising to go and tell. Our running might not be quite so blatant as Jonah's, but it might look like finding a million other good and even godly things to work on instead of the one thing God has called us to do that we really don't want to do. We're busy in every part of the Christian life except the primary call to go and tell. How big a role do missions and evangelism play in our personal lives, in our congregation, and in the American church generally? Throwing ourselves into the storm around us means giving up the comfort and complacency we love too much and choosing to live and speak the gospel message to our family, friends, and neighbors.

And as you embrace a life of self-sacrifice instead of self-protective running, remember that Christ has already overcome death for you. Your sacrifice will not end in death; you will be raised up to new life! The Christian life is not about losing your life; it is about losing your life in order save your life, and that makes all the difference in the world. Casting yourself on God's mercy will feel like dying. What a mercy! Now you're ready for resurrection!

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*