

“The Pious Prayers of Pagans: Jonah and the Journey Outward (Part 3)

Psalm 96; Acts 11:1-18; Jonah 1:1-17

One of the most obvious things about this first scene of the book of Jonah is the radical difference between the pagan sailors and the Israelite prophet. If all you knew about Jonah was that he was a servant of Yahweh, what would you expect? You'd expect the God-servant to be prayerful, pious, and prophetic. You'd expect the pagans to be prayerless, or at minimum polytheistically prayerful. Morally, you'd expect the prophet of God to sparkle like a diamond against the dark backcloth of the pagan's godless behavior. You'd expect some sort of conflict between the upright Israelite and the hostile pagan sailors.

But that's not what we get, is it? We have an Israelite prophet, as we saw last week, who has his Hebrew identity badge, and his framed prophet ordination certificate. But at the same time he's showing off these markers of his official religious position and prestige, he's running away from the face of God.

Meanwhile, you have these pagans and their prayers.

Now, look: when this storm hits, they are definitely praying to idols. To false gods. You've got an international pagan crew, and (5) each of them is crying out to their own God. It's not okay to pray to “your own god.” None of them is innocent. All of them are complicit in false religions designed to use the gods to make their lives better and to justify their wickedness.

Still: consider how different their attitudes are than Jonah's! There's a storm, and even though they're tough, sea-tested sailors, they immediately realize this is a supernatural storm. They know that, whatever power is out there, they do not control such a god; they don't control the storm; they don't control their own fate. They throw the ship's cargo overboard—which means that the journey is now, at best, a complete financial disaster. And they pray their hearts out, begging for mercy from whatever god might have ears to hear and compassion to act.

Jonah (5) is down in the lower deck of the boat, and they can't believe (6) he's not praying! “What are you doing, sleeper! Get up! Pray to your god!”

Jonah, of course, does *not* pray. Before, the pagans were praying to their own gods. But who's the first to pray to Israel's God: the Israelite, or the pagans? Yep, verse 14: the pagans.

Think of the first chapter as a series of calls and responses. Yahweh calls, Jonah is supposed to respond.

First, the word of Yahweh, Israel's God and the one true God of all, calls to Jonah (verse 1).

What's the response, Jonah flees from Yahweh's presence (verse 3).

Yahweh sends the storm (4).

While the pagans respond, Jonah responds by going below deck (5).

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Before Jonah ever even speaks to his God, the pagans have turned from their own gods, and they’re calling on Yahweh by his covenant name! (14) “Yahweh, spare us, and don’t count us guilty. Your prophet, after all, told us to throw him overboard. You’re in charge, Yahweh.” They have submitted in humility, while Jonah has run from God and not said a word to him.

And guess what: God hears their prayers.

They threw him over, the sea grew calm, and they lived to tell the story.

The Pagans’ Profound Penance

The first scene ends with the pagans *continuing* to pray. And in these prayers we hear **The Pagans’ Profound Penance**. That is: they want to make things right between themselves and the God they’ve just met.

The storm, and then the way it ceased, caused them (16) to fear Yahweh, Israel’s God. So they make sacrifices. They know that they are not innocent. The lot fell to Jonah. They knew it was *Jonah* whose rebellion God was going after with the storm. But still, they sensed that *they* were guilty, too. Does this remind you of anything? Jesus and the disciples are in the boat. The disciples are on a boat fishing. Jesus tells experienced fishermen, who have caught nothing, where to cast their nets. They do it. They catch a bazillion fish and almost sink under the weight of the catch. What does Peter say? “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful person!” The miracle doesn’t have anything to do with *sin*. But when you meet the living God, you’re aware of how messed up and broken and sinful you are. And you acknowledge it!

That’s exactly what the pagan sailors do here. And even though they don’t have instructions from the Hebrew Scriptures about how or who or where to make sacrifices, they know they owe Yahweh their lives, despite their complicity in sin. So they sacrifice.

And what else? The Pagans continue their profound penance by making vows to Yahweh. In other words, not only are they admitting their guilt, but they’re promising to live in the presence of Yahweh from here out. Jonah, prayerless, flees God’s presence. Pagans promise to live the rest of their lives in God’s presence. They’re saying “Yahweh, clearly we can never flee from your presence, as this Jonah has shown us. But to whom could we go instead? You have our lives in the palm of your hand. We will live in your presence, dreadful as that seems to us right now!”

You see what’s going on here? First the pagans pray (like Jonah should have). Then the pagans repent (like Jonah should have). Then the pagans make sacrifices to deal with their guilt (like Jonah should have). Then the pagans plan a new life of obedience to God (like Jonah should have).

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And there's one more thing these pagans do that Jonah should have.

The Pagans' Powerful Prophecy

And then the captain says something interesting: “Who knows (6): maybe your god will hear us, have compassion on us, and save us?!”

Isn't that something? The God of Israel sent a prophet to prophesy to pagans. And here the pagans have become prophets! Taking the prophetic message right out of the prophet's mouth, and pushing the prophet toward Yahweh his God.

Right at the beginning, God had appointed and sent Jonah to go and be his prophet. He doesn't go. Over and over, as Jonah is running away, God “appoints” (or, NIV, “sends”) things to prophesy to Jonah— to call him back to God and his covenant. He (4) appoints “a great wind and a violent storm,” (17) he appoints a huge fish.

But here in the boat, these pagans are the prophets Jonah was too faithless to be. Jonah son of Ammatai means “dove, son of truth or faithfulness.” But our dove is warring against his God. And he's no son of truth or faithfulness. The pagans speak the truth that Jonah won't. The pagans have barely heard of Yahweh, and what's coming out of their mouths is far and away more like the character of Jonah's God than Jonah would ever say: compassionate and sovereign, attentive to our cries for help, responsive to our repentance.

The Sign of Jonah

Friends, you and I shouldn't miss the “sign of Jonah.”

This book of prophecy breaks into our worship service this morning in AD 2020 to tell us at least two things:

1. Our God can and does make himself known to *anyone* he wants. Call yourself a Christian. But never let “Christian” turn into an identity badge worn with a proud and boastful spirit. Don't let your conviction that the Holy Spirit is at work in the church leave us insensitive to the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of people outside the church. How dare we assume that the Spirit is *not* at work, subtly and wisely leading many people toward the Lord Jesus! If we have this kind of spiritual pride, ironically, we've become spiritual outsiders when we think we're spiritually superior. Don't be more stingy than the Spirit of God.
2. Because the Spirit of God made every person, and made every person a deeply spiritual person, there are spiritual longings and cries and prayers in your neighbor's heart and often on your neighbors lips that you need to take seriously. We were made to worship, and our hearts will be searching for the proper aim of worship until our hearts rest, finally, in the Lord Jesus

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Christ. God heard the cries of these pious pagans. Open *your* ears and listen to the spiritual longings of your neighbors. And, if you have the chance, perhaps you can say: “the longing you have— I have it too. And Jesus is the most astonishing person because, at the very same time that he fulfills my longings, he awakens new and deeper longings, and promises to fulfill those, too.”

Never forget this: If you are a son or daughter of Abaraham by faith in Jesus, you’re the son or daughter of an Abraham who was himself a pagan who didn’t know his own right hand from his left hand. The Lord God came to Abraham and began to answer his heart’s longings and jumbled prayers with himself. The Lord God *walked with*, and *befriended* Abraham. Never forget that you and I were these sailors. It’s better to be a pagan sailor with a mouth full of pious prayers and powerful prophecy with a heart that God is glad to hear, than a proud prophet with a heart closed to God and neighbor. “A heart closed off to God and neighbor.” Sounds like hell. But thanks be to God that he has befriended us in Jesus, and opened our hearts to God and neighbor. Let’s make our vows to follow him. Let’s make our sacrifices of praise to him. Let’s turn from our pride toward his patience and power. And let’s watch as he turns us, full-hearted, toward our neighbor, with prayers and prophecy of our own, ushering others into the family and friendship of God.