

Finding the Eternal in the Storm

Jonathan K. Dodson | Jonah 1:1-16 | September 10, 2016

Today we begin four weeks in Jonah. There are several reasons we're looking at this particular book: 1) It's good for us to continually see the relevance of the OT to modern life. The stories are stories of the Eternal at work among us, and the eternal is always relevant because it never changes. 2) Jonah like all of us is called to serve a great city, but like Jonah all of us struggle with working out that call. 3) Beyond a great city, Jonah shows us a greater God, something we need, not just in sorrow, but also in *ease*. The first chapter: A Storm, A City, A Survival.

Storm

It's not uncommon for us to ask when storms and natural disasters hit, "Where was God in the storm?" One Christian leader famously claimed God destroys the homes of *gays*. But then his own home was destroyed by Hurricane Harvey. What role does God play in the storm? Jonah says: "**But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up**" (1:4). The image of "hurling" is the Lord as a divine warrior throwing storms like a spear. So in Jonah's case God is behind the storm. But does that mean God also hurled Hurricane Harvey? Where was he in that storm? Where is he in your personal storms? Is he in the control room with his finger on the button? Jonah gives us two ways to sort through this: divine decree and concurrence. In *divine decree*, God sends the storm. He sends it in response to Jonah's sinful refusal to go to Nineveh. The other category to explain where the storm comes from is *concurrence*. This explanation says the storm is the result of natural causes *under* the general providence of God. Jesus explains it like this, "not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father's will." In general, everything happens under God's will. But in specific, the bird running into a window or a bullet, happens as the result of natural causes. We see this idea in Jonah when he is thrown overboard. In 1:15, it says the sailors, "**they took up Jonah and threw him into the sea**" but then in 2:3 Jonah says, "**You cast me into the deep.**" Which is it? God or the sailors? It's both: general providence concurs with human action. Jonah's entry into the icy cold waters was the direct result of natural human choices, which concurred with God's sovereign will. Hurricane Harvey? Since we have no live, inspired commentary on current events, we shouldn't make pronouncements like the preacher. Instead, we should conclude Harvey was the consequence of a fallen world and natural weather patterns, not the enmity of God. *But God is still at work in the storm, in the sailors actions, seeking to accomplish something. And so he is with you, in your trials. That's the real challenge—to attend to the Lord of the Storm more than the storm itself, to discover what God is accomplishing in you.* Because the pain can be so blinding. In the great storm, the great fish, the great city, what is God accomplishing? Each of these "great" things are *obstacles* for Jonah to overcome, placed there in the providence of God to teach him something. The next great image, the city.

City

Nineveh is described as a great city four times. What makes it great? It was located across the river from modern day Mosul, Iraq, in the heart of the Assyrian Empire and was the first of the great cities in ancient Assyria (Gen 10:11). It symbolized the power and wealth of the pagan empire. And although it experienced decline during Jonah's time, it still held its

reputation. King Sennacherib described Nineveh as “a noble metropolis, the meeting place of gods and goddesses, and of the eternal plan of the world.” Some of us feel this way about Austin. What starts here changes the world, and that’s just the University of Texas. People move here for influence and opportunity. I did. In 2006 I moved my fledgling family across the country with a vision to renew not just this city but to spawn a movement of city renewing churches. We’ve not had wild success. Although we’ve planted two churches and helped plant several others. We also had to shut down our church planting residency several years ago due to limited bandwidth. Recognizing Austin as the largest creative class region in the U.S., I seized upon the opportunity to plant a church that was Creative Class in focus and transclass in scope, meaning we would try to communicate the gospel to creatives who, in being reconciled to God would become agents of spiritual, social, and economic reconciliation in our city. But we didn’t baptize any new followers of Jesus the first year. Although we’ve seen God save sinners every year since, there are so many more. *Walk out of this building and look up, people stacked sky high in need of God’s saving grace.* We could do more ministry to the marginalized, have more cultural impact, but it’s extremely difficult when a lot of your church turns over every three years. The challenge of transience. I’d be lying if I told you I haven’t been flustered, even frustrated by this. If you told me in 2006 what the church would be like in 2017, I would have been deflated. I might not have even started the church. I moved to Austin for movement, mass conversion, whole city renewal. What has God been teaching me in the storm? *The patience of willing something eternal (K).* See, many of my goals were dressed up in the eternal, even shaded in by them, but internally I possessed *the impatience of willing something temporal*. I wanted success. Jonah wanted success. What would his peers think, going off and preaching to their enemies? The impatience of willing something temporal drives our creative economy. If we don’t get the success we want, we’ll change jobs, careers, spouses, churches, cities...*commodities in our search for greatness*. But willing the temporal goes head to head with the Eternal, and creates friction. The heat starts to come out in small ways. Parents who start working late begin to snap at their children. They become an inconvenience not a blessing. Unhinged from eternal satisfaction, we begin to look for it other places, and before you know it you’re cursing at your spouse and open to an affair. We need the patience of willing the Eternal. This impatience surfaces in our *mercy* ministries, where people who want more visible change begin to judge those around them, even the church, for not accomplishing your measure of success. The *evangelist* criticizes the church for not having more conversions, the *pietist* critiques people for not being in fight clubs, the *artist* for people not engaging culture, and on and on. *The impatience of willing the temporal, the frustration that the kingdom of God does not move at your speed, will crush the weak and inflate the proud.* But if I had moved when I wanted to, I would never have enjoyed the fruit of willing something eternal, the shuffling of feet of the redeemed sinners at the Lord’s table year after year, the single fighting well for purity and service, the strained marriage thriving. *Is the Eternal what your heart longs for?* Not Jonah, he was called to preach to a great city. To call out for its repentance over unreconciled evil. *But* the narrative does not focus on the evil of the city. Subtly, it traces the evil of Jonah. What did he do for the city? Turned his back and fled. *You see, we can make too much and too little of the city. We can squeeze it for success or flee it for safety.* Why did Jonah flee? Was it because it was a *pagan* city. Jonah was just fine getting his passage from pagans, even in sacrificing his life for them. *Jonah fled for a deeper reason.* The same reason God appointed the storm. We’re told,

three times, Jonah fled not the city but “[the presence of God](#)” (3, 10). In Hebrew it says *the face of God*. Are you seeking or fleeing the face of God? It’s amazing what we’ll do to get away. Jonah God bought a ticket and got on a boat. Sometimes it’s that dramatic. Literally moving. But often it’s as subtle as moving your Bible out of view, making excuses for not going to City Group, losing interest in corporate worship, devaluing discipleship. It begins, not with a dastardly act but simple disinterest in the presence of God. And his disinterest pulls others down with him. He brings a storm into the sailors lives. You see, Jonah is a cautionary tale of what it looks like to curve in on yourself and miss the face of God. If we don’t love his face, we can’t truly love the city bc we’re too busy using or despising it.

Survival

Will they survive? Waves crash and the boat rocks back and forth, the sailors do what we all do when we enter a storm; they cry out to their gods. When life becomes unbearable, the thing we cry out to first is our real god. What do you reach for? A friend, a family member, a vacation, anger, booze, or innocent Netflix? When adversity hits we all cry out to the things we think will deliver us from pain & hardship. But when the booze wear off, the shows are over, the anger subsides things aren’t any better. Our gods fail. Who does Jonah call on? Down in the bottom of the boat, he’s in a deep sleep, even a snore. Jonah *doesn’t cry out* because he’s too busy distracting himself. The story draws attention to his descent. God calls him to arise but he does down to Joppa, then into the ship, and then verse 5, the *inner* part of the ship. [The Scale of Spiritual Descent begins with distraction, moves to disinterest, ends in desertion,](#) and suddenly we find ourselves wrapped in seaweed at the bottom of the sea, incarcerated by spiritual apathy (Prov 6:10-11). Are you sleepy? *Is the presence of God real in your heart?* We can’t love the temporal *and* enjoy his Face. Don’t avoid the Lord of the storm. He wants to accomplish something in you. This summer I confessed to the Lord I just didn’t love him. I’d become indifferent to his Face. The first step out of indifference was telling him, *confession*. The second was *putting myself in his presence*, in his Word and in prayer. But to will something eternal, over the long haul, we need something more than confession and prayer. We need another boat sleeper. Jesus also slept in a boat during a storm. His sailors also got frantic and woke him in despair. But Jesus wasn’t fleeing the face of God. He was resting in the providence of God, storms and all. His was the sleep of trust, not the sleep of apathy. Jesus, despite carrying the weight of the world, was the most relaxed man alive. How did he do it? By patiently trusting the plan of the Eternal. By being preoccupied, not with the storm but with the Lord of the storm. See there are many eternal things we can will, but the chief thing, the ultimate thing is the one he wants for us most *to know the Eternal One himself*. His mercy, love, patience, kindness, truth, and grace. And the only way to know that is to look him in the face. Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:4-6). Jesus is the anti-Jonah. The watery elements rise up to judge Jonah, but Jesus judges and rules the seas. Water will not conquer him. He is accomplishing something eternal. His exile will be on land, in his timing, on his terms. He gives up his life so we can come face to face with God, so you can enjoy the light of the knowledge of the glory of God shining in his face. Will you learn the patience of willing something eternal?