

Jonah 1:10-16

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Jonah tells the sailors that the storm is the result of his disobedience to the LORD. He suggests that they send him into the sea so that the sea may calm down. After much resistance, the sailors cast Jonah overboard, and the storm stops suddenly. Then the sailors fear the LORD and worship Him.

In the previous section, after isolating Jonah as the one responsible for the storm, the sailors asked him several questions to determine the next course of action. Jonah answered by saying that he was a Hebrew fleeing from the LORD, the God who made the sea and the dry land (vv. 7–9). When the *men* heard Jonah’s declaration, *they became extremely frightened* (literally, “they feared with a great fear”). As in verse 5, this fear refers to the sailors’ terror for their physical safety. Why such a great fear?

The *men became frightened* because they just learned about the LORD, the God in heaven who made the sea and the storm. They just realized that the LORD, the God of Jonah, is more powerful than the gods they served. They also found out that Jonah was fleeing from this great God, putting their lives in jeopardy. So, *they said to him, ‘How could you do this?’* Here they are asking Jonah how he could put them in jeopardy when Jonah knew he was running from God.

Jonah has been appointed as a missionary to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, Israel’s enemy, and tell them to repent. But Jonah did not want Nineveh to repent; he wanted God to destroy them (Jonah 4:2). God commissioned him to Nineveh, but he got on a boat headed to Tarshish, the opposite direction. The sailors understood right away that they were caught in the middle of a dispute between Jonah and his God. It is ironic that these pagan sailors call out Jonah committing this wicked action while having the correct understanding of the character of *the LORD: For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD because he had told them.*

As the sailors thought about the risk of losing their lives on account of a disobedient prophet, they continued to explore their options for survival. *They said to him, ‘What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?’—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.* Since the sailors knew that Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, they asked him for a solution. They apparently are inquiring what they can do to appease the wrath of the LORD, since they were not aware of His requirements for obedience. Only *Jonah* would know how to appease the wrath of God.

The prophet Jonah gave an answer to the sailors that was clearly unanticipated. Since he had acknowledged that he was the cause for the storm, it seems reasonable to expect that he would appeal to the LORD for repentance and forgiveness. He might pray that the LORD would cause them to return safely to dry land so he could then obey and go to Nineveh. Instead, Jonah gives a response that shocks the sailors: *‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.’*

We know this is unexpected because *the men* were reluctant to follow Jonah's advice. Perhaps they believed that deities protected the lives of their worshipers, and it might make things worse. Or perhaps they simply had the common morality God has placed within all humans, and realized it was simply wrong to do what would amount to human sacrifice (Romans 2:14). In either case, *the men* decided to react honorably. They *rowed desperately to return to land, but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.*

The verb translated as *rowed* means to "dig" or to "work one's way through by rowing." It occurs in the book of Ezekiel, where the LORD asked Ezekiel to "dig through the wall" (Ezekiel 8:8). The use of this verb here in the book of Jonah tells us that the sailors made an extreme effort to return to shore. But they were unsuccessful in their attempt.

Since the sailors tried to return to shore without any success, they thought Jonah's God was against their decision. At this point, it seems they realized they were all going to die anyway, so their only option was to follow Jonah's advice to throw him overboard. Worst case, they all die but Jonah dies first. Best case, they are spared. However, apparently fearful of making Jonah's God angry by throwing His servant into the sea, *they called on the LORD* to implore His favor. They began by saying, '*We earnestly pray, O LORD.*

The sailors' request *We earnestly pray, O LORD* shows the sailors' reverence for the LORD. They had heard Jonah's testimony and believed in the power of the LORD. So, instead of praying to their pagan gods, as they had done earlier (Jonah 1:5), they now prayed to the true God, the one who controls the sea and the dry land (Jonah 1:9).

The sailors' prayer consists of two requests. First, they petitioned the LORD for their safety and protection as they undertook to send Jonah overboard: *Do not let us perish on account of this man's life!* Since the sailors knew that Jonah was the guilty person, they did not want to suffer the consequences of his disobedience. They appealed to Jonah's God for their protection. Second, the sailors said to the LORD, *Do not put innocent blood on us!* This statement shows that the sailors were worried about being held accountable by the LORD for the death of Jonah. They desired Yahweh to view this act as one of honoring God, not violating His commands.

The motif behind the sailors' two-fold petition is then spelled out: *For You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased.* The sailors acknowledged the sovereign power of the LORD. He had thrown the storm at the ship (v. 4). He had intervened in the casting of lots and allowed the sailors to identify Jonah as the guilty man (v. 7). For all these reasons, the sailors rightly believed that the LORD was ultimately behind everything. Their words echo the words of Psalm 115, which contrasts the pagan gods with the LORD: "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Psalm 115:3).

We can wonder at this point why Jonah has not intervened to petition God to stop the sea, and promise to return to Nineveh. Jonah 4:2 infers that Jonah's rationale was that he would prefer to die, and Nineveh not be warned, rather than have Nineveh repent and God relent of His judgment. In fact, about thirty years after the death of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel during Jonah's ministry, Assyria would destroy Israel, and deport its people. So Jonah's calculation was not irrational. However, it seems Jonah's view of God is limited, thinking that he could thwart

God's will. It seems perhaps Jonah has rationalized that if he dies then Assyria can't be warned, so in being thrown into the sea, Israel will be saved. God could of course warn Assyria many ways. But in this case, the LORD chooses to work through Jonah, and teach him a lesson.

Having offered a prayer to the LORD, the sailors *picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea*. Suddenly, *the sea stopped its raging*. The calm showed the sailors once again the power of the LORD. It also confirmed that the storm was the result of Jonah's disobedience. The turbulence ceased once the sailors faithfully carried out Jonah's instructions. The LORD answered their prayers (Jonah 1:14).

In response to God's answer to their prayers, *the men feared the LORD greatly*. They stood in awe of Him because they recognized that all power belonged to Him. As they showed reverence to *the LORD*, they *offered a sacrifice to Him* (literally, "they sacrificed a sacrifice").

The term translated as *sacrifice* is "zebhach" (it can also be written as "zevah") in the Hebrew language. It normally refers to the slaughter of an animal. A "zevah" was generally an offering of thanksgiving which served to bring fellowship between God and the worshiper (Leviticus 7:16; 22:18-23). The book of 1 Kings describes the course of this ritual. The worshiper would take the animal, slay it, and boil its flesh. He would then give the meat to the people so that they might eat (1 Kings 19:21).

Since this type of ritual involves the killing of an animal, it is not clear when the sailors did it. Perhaps, they had the animal aboard with them as they prepared for a long voyage, or they performed the ritual after they reached dry land. At any rate, the text tells us that they offered a *sacrifice to the LORD*.

In addition to offering a *sacrifice* to the LORD, the sailors also *made vows*. In ancient times, people often made *vows* when requesting divine assistance. That is, they promised to perform a certain action if the deity would grant the request. This voluntary act was done to show gratitude to the deity for providing relief or deliverance since the person requiring divine intervention was experiencing some sort of affliction (1 Samuel 1:9-11).

Here in the book of Jonah, the sailors acknowledged the power and character of the LORD and made a solemn vow to praise Him.

Biblical Text

¹⁰ Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. ¹¹ So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy. ¹² He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm *has come upon you*." ¹³ However, the men rowed *desperately* to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming *even* stormier against them. ¹⁴ Then they called on the Lord and said, "We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put

innocent blood on us; for You, O Lord, have done as You have pleased.”¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.