

Jonah 1:4-6

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The LORD throws a great windstorm on the sea. The sailors pray to their gods and wake Jonah up from his deep sleep to pray to his God.

Jonah took a ship to go to Tarshish to flee from his assigned mission (v. 3). But the all-powerful God would have His way in Jonah's life. To demonstrate that He is the one who controls everyone and everything, *the LORD hurled a great wind on the sea*. The author placed the subject (*the LORD*) first in the sentence, reversing the normal Hebrew word order of verb-subject. By doing so, he made clear that the *storm* came from *the LORD*, the all-powerful God. The storm was not a coincidence. Jonah disobeyed God, thinking that he could thwart his assignment to preach to the Assyrians, and spare their looming judgment. Now God would use natural forces to get Jonah back on track.

The verb *hurl* is "tûl" in Hebrew. It means "to cast" and often implies a degree of violence. The verb appears in the book of 1 Samuel, where Saul *hurled* his spear at Jonathan "to strike him down" (1 Samuel 20:33). Here, in our passage, *the LORD hurled* a powerful *wind on the sea*, causing *a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up*. The mighty windstorm stirred up feelings of helplessness among *the sailors*. As a result, they *became afraid*.

The verb "to fear" (yawray in Hebrew) is translated here as "*became afraid*" and refers to a concern about consequences or outcomes. It is used to refer to an attitude of reverence and awe to God, and fear of adverse outcomes from breaking covenant with Him, and not following His ways (Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20).

The Hebrew word "yawray" can also refer to human terror relative to circumstances that threaten their physical safety. This is the application here in verse 5. The *sailors* feared greatly for their lives as they experienced the *storm* (v. 10). The magnitude of the *storm* not only caused extreme fear among the sailors but also caused *every man* to cry *to his god*. This would indicate that the *sailors* held a philosophy of animism, which connects physical actions to spiritual causes. This was the dominant view of the Ancient Near East, and is still common today in those regions.

In their animistic context, it was natural for people to recognize calamities or misfortunes as an expression of divine punishment. The Ancient Near Eastern world was polytheistic, meaning that people worshiped many gods. Typically, different gods were called upon for different favors. Now the *sailors* called out to their gods, likely nautical gods and gods of weather, hoping that one of their patron deities would intervene to calm the *windstorm*.

Having *cried to their gods* without success, the *sailors* decided to multiply their actions to alleviate the situation. They *threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them*. The verb translated as *threw* is the same verb translated as *hurled* in v. 4. As *the LORD hurled* the powerful *wind on the sea*, the *sailors hurled* their *cargo* (their goods) *on the sea*. They

did so to keep the *ship* from sinking. But throwing the *cargo* on the sea also means that the *sailors* lost their goods.

But where had *Jonah* been during all this time? The text tells us that *Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship*. The author emphasized Jonah's action by placing the subject (*Jonah*) in front of the verb. While the *sailors* were doing all they could to save their lives from the powerful *storm*, Jonah was inactive. He *had gone down* below deck, *lain down*, and *fallen sound asleep*.

Falling *sound asleep* is a special kind of deep sleep, causing the one who sleeps to be unconscious of what is around him (Genesis 15:12; 1 Samuel 26:12). That means, *Jonah* was in a deep sleep and was not aware of the magnitude of the *storm*, nor of the activity of the *sailors*, who tried to keep *the ship* from sinking.

The *captain*, eager to engage everyone aboard to attend the prayer meeting, *approached Jonah* and *said*, 'How is it that you are sleeping?' The *captain* was surprised to see someone sleeping so soundly during such a tragedy. So, he commanded *Jonah*, saying, *Get up, call on your god!*

The verb translated as *get up* is "qûm" in Hebrew. It is the verb that begins v. 2, where the LORD commissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh. There the NASB translated it as "arise." Similarly, the verb *call* [qāra'] appeared in v. 2, with the meaning "cry against." Thus, *Jonah* heard these commands twice: once from *the LORD* and once from the *captain*.

Though the captain was unaware of the LORD's command to *Jonah*, the echo of the LORD's words in his mouth likely reminded the prophet of his divine mission. The repetition also highlights the fact that nothing can escape God. He can use anything to get our attention. God can speak through animals, as He used a donkey to speak to Balaam (Numbers 22:28). He used the very person seeking to crucify Jesus to speak a prophetic word that He would die for the sins of the world (John 11:49-52). In our passage, God used the lips of a pagan sailor to remind His servant *Jonah* that he could not run from his mission.

The captain was in a desperate situation, having realized that the gods of the *sailors* were helpless. Perhaps he thought *Jonah* was the last option since Jonah was sleeping and was not part of the prayer meeting. He aroused *Jonah* from his deep sleep and asked him to call out to his god, hoping to find a solution. He expressed his wish vividly when he stated, *Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish*.

The term *perhaps* is a way of holding out hope (Jonah 3:9). At this point, the *captain* knew nothing about the superiority of Jonah's *god*. He simply wanted to appeal to everyone to pray so that a god might spare their lives. The situation was so difficult that the *sailors* worried much about their lives. Yet the prophet *Jonah* slept deeply, showing no concern. This could be, in part, because Jonah thinks if he died, God's desire to offer repentance to the Assyrians would be thwarted, and Israel would be saved from the Assyrian threat (Jonah 4:2).

Biblical Text

⁴The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. ⁵Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten *it* for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep. ⁶So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps *your* god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.”