

God's Sustaining Love

Spring Quarter: God Loves Us

Unit 3: God's Pervasive and Sustaining Love

Sunday school lesson for the week of May 7, 2017

By Dr. Hal Brady

Lesson Scripture: Jonah 1:7-17

Background Scripture: Jonah 1

The book of Jonah has always been somewhat controversial. Many readers have been inclined to write off the story of Jonah as fictitious. The value and beauty of the book have often been obscured by the fish story, which so many have difficulty swallowing.

Early, however, Jonah was a historical figure since he was referenced in another context in one of ancient Israel's history books (2 Kings 14:25). And Jesus himself seems to have taken Jonah's story as a matter of fact (for example, Matthew 12:38-41).

On the other hand, the writer of the "Interpreter's Bible" states that the book is not history nor was it intended to be read that way. The writer suggests that the author of the book of Jonah was so on fire to drive home his message that he adopted the memorable method of parable, the story. It was the same technique which Jesus employed constantly, "There was a man who had two sons..." (Luke 15:11ff). Obviously, that was not history, but the figure of that father running toward his returned and repentant son has moved through the ages and the hearts of humankind as no other blessed reality.

So regardless of how we interpret the story of Jonah, whether as history or parable, it is the story and message of the prophet Jonah that is the critical issue. Perhaps Frederick W. Faber in his hymn "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" was pointing to it when he said,

"the love of God is broader

Than the measure of man's mind"

Story Review

"The word of the Lord came to" is a common phrase in the Old Testament prophets. It indicates a "true" prophet, since the message originates with God.

As you recall, God instructs Jonah to go to Nineveh, which is the capital of the dreaded Assyrian Empire, the most hated and feared of Israel's oppressors. Not too surprising, we discover shortly that Jonah is unwilling to go there. As a Hebrew he might have felt fear, hatred or contempt in response to the Assyrians.

But God's message, meanwhile, is crying out against the city of Nineveh and its great wickedness. We are told here that while Jonah's succinct sermon (Jonah 3:4) was a promise of destruction, the

very fact that God sent the prophet to cry out is a sign of divine mercy. If the Lord had really wanted to destroy Nineveh, no warning would have been given.

Now, the exact location of Tarshish is unknown, but it is widely assumed to have been a destination in the Western Mediterranean. But wherever Tarshish may have been, we do know that Jonah boarded a ship headed west, presumably “away from the presence of the Lord.” In sharp contrast to Jonah, the psalmist knew that it was impossible to escape the presence of God (Psalm 139:7-12).

Scholars relate that the prophet of God would not do the Lord’s bidding, the forces of nature did. It is most noteworthy that God neither ignored Jonah’s disobedience nor punished it. Rather, the Lord simply made Jonah’s disobedience difficult, which is a beautiful thing. Meanwhile, we can assume that like Nineveh, if God has really intended to destroy the ship, it would have been destroyed. The danger only serves to urge repentance and obedience.

As the storm hits, all hands are on deck with the exception of Jonah. Everyone else is doing his part while Jonah is asleep and absent. In their fears, the sailors seek both a natural and supernatural rescue. The captain also insists that Jonah do his part as well.

Since the underlying paradigm was that the world was filled with many gods, it is only natural that all available gods would be called on to deliver the ship. The captain and his crew were trying everything.

Scholars inform us that casting lots is represented in Scripture as a commonly accepted means of discernment. In this case the sailors used the method to identify who was at fault for the storm. Jonah was found out, and so they questioned him, desperate to find the reason for their trouble and a solution for it. It all becomes clear to Jonah for he knows the truth. Then it was that he tells them who he is and who God is. He admits that he is the cause of the trouble, and he even offers the solution. Jonah understands that God is targeting him and not the ship. Therefore, as soon as he is thrown overboard, the ship will be safe.

Following Jonah’s admission, it is amazing that the endangered sailors do not immediately seize the opportunity to escape their difficulties. They are not so concerned in saving themselves that they will sacrifice this stranger, even with his okay. They try everything else, but to their credit they are reluctant to throw overboard a fellow human being.

However, when it became obvious that Jonah’s proposal was the only solution, still the sailors performed the act out of absolute necessity. And as scholars attest, as evidence of a certain conversion, these sailors do not repent before their own gods for what they are about to do. Rather, they appeal to Jonah’s God, acknowledging the Lord’s sovereignty in the entire matter.

As the story continues, Jonah’s proposed solution works. When he is thrown overboard, the sea becomes calm and the ship is safe. And that reality prompts those on board the ship to worship and make commitments to the Lord.

Interestingly, scholars point out that within the larger context of the whole story of Jonah, we notice that unbelievers are more responsive to the Lord than the prophet himself. Jonah was disobedient at

the beginning and cranky at the end. However, the sailors with whom he had contact came to faith and obedience. And in similar fashion, as seen in chapter 3, the dreaded Ninevites also hastily turn to the Lord in response to Jonah's message.

Finally, we are informed that just as the wind, sea, and storm were at God's bidding, so, too, are the fish. All of creation is seen as under the Lord's authority and instruments of the divine will. And further, realizing the profound faith of the pagan sailors, we see that it is Jonah, God's own prophet, who emerges from Chapter 1 as the lone rebel against the will of God.

Lots of Causes

One of the central questions that comes out of the story of Jonah is "why?" Why did this calamity happen, or more accurately, why did this calamity happen to me? Seems that human beings have struggled with this question forever.

Why does this person enjoy good health most of his/her life, while that other poor soul suffers one calamity after another? Why does he live to a ripe old age, while she dies before her time? Diseases, accidents, disasters – so many troubles and surprises prompt us to wonder why.

As we all know, the closer to home the trouble is the more intense the question becomes. While we are mindful and concerned about calamities that occur far away, the question is more theoretical in nature. But when that calamity hits us or someone we love, then the need to know is much more urgent.

According to scholars, we meet with two extremes in trying to capture the role of God in the affairs of this world and of our lives. On the one end, there are those who believe that God causes everything. While on the other end, there are those that believe God causes nothing. And it is this latter growing conviction that is dominant in our modern and postmodern Western mind. Everything can be explained scientifically. The cause is found in astronomy or biology or genetics or other. For this group, the explanation for the storm in Jonah is meteorological, not theological.

Now, at the other extreme are those who believe or assume that God causes everything. This position can most often be heard at funerals. "The Lord took him" or "it was just God's will," they'll say of the deceased, whether the cause of death was old age, a deadly disease, or a drunk driver. The certainty that God causes whatever happens helps them to feel more at peace with the situation. Note, however, that it may cause them to feel less at peace with God.

Getting back to the sailors on Jonah's boat, they cast their lots because they didn't believe in chance. They believed that those ancient dice revealed real answers to their peril. And going on 3,000 years later, we don't want to believe in chance, either. We want to believe that there is a reason why things happen. So regardless of where we look for the answer – lots, science or in the heavens – we are all asking why.

The Human Why

As scholars assert, the ancients were perhaps more inclined than our generation to attribute happenings to divine causation. Likewise, the ancient peoples also understand human responsibility and causation.

“What is this that you have done?” the fearful sailors asked Jonah (1:10). These sailors didn’t doubt that the storm came from a god, but they reckoned that that god had a reason for sending the storm. And the lots had pointed to Jonah as the culprit.

Now, this brings up another very significant question. What role do we play in the troubles we experience? How much of a cause are we in the effect?

We are reminded that the story of Jonah presents us with some interesting insights into this matter of the human role in calamities. Specifically, we see three different case studies. First, there is Jonah. Second, there are his traveling companions en route to Tarshish. And third, there are the Ninevites.

Jonah’s circumstance is the easiest to understand. He disobeyed God and brought trouble on himself. We do not feel particularly sorry for Jonah. Here, our sense of justice is not offended.

The sailors, on the other hand, are a different situation. They face calamity, yet they themselves are innocent. The Bible doesn’t pull any punches about the realities of this world. We know full well how the deeds of some can cause the suffering of others. 9/11 is a noted example. Human wickedness or foolishness almost always has a victim, and too often is an innocent victim.

Then there is the case of the Ninevites. For the most part, they are the opposite of the sailors and the most bothersome to Jonah. They are the guilty people, known for their cruelty and wickedness. And yet, at the story’s conclusion, they are forgiven. They seemingly go unpunished, and it galls Jonah that they don’t get what they have coming to them.

The Best Reason Why

Mainly, the story of Jonah is about the role of God. The narrative does not back away from attributing storms and fish, wind and waves, plants and worms to the work of the Lord. And the humans involved do not doubt God’s participation in their affairs.

But, as noted previously, the modern mind might reel at such assertions. Some even decry the story of Jonah as superstitious and naïve. Yet, as scholars point out, the objection is mostly rooted in a doubt about God’s existence rather than a doubt about divine activity or a concern for the laws of nature. Just as I break no laws of nature when I pick-up a rock and throw it, surely God has the capacity and prerogative to hurl a great wind or even send a fish to do his bidding.

As scholars make clear what we really have in the story of Jonah is not merely a glimpse into the activity of God but into the heart of God. We are reminded that the Lord sends Jonah to Nineveh to warn the city, which is an act of mercy. The Lord causes a storm to chasten Jonah. This, too, is a kindness, for either ignoring or destroying the disobedient prophet would have been unloving. The

Lord spares the sailors, which turn into believers and worshipers. The Lord gives Jonah a second chance to obey. And, in addition, the Lord pardons the penitent Ninevites (3:10).

In summary, God is a very active cause of many effects in the story of Jonah. And as we grasp the heart behind that activity, we will discover the best answer to the most important “why.” As we are informed, it is not necessarily an answer to why everything happens, but it is an answer to why God does everything that God does. Because of love.

Action Plan

1. What is your answer to those who say that God causes everything or that God causes nothing?
2. How does God respond when human behavior causes calamity?

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