

Chapter Six

THE CONDUCT OF A BACKSLIDDEN BELIEVER

Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep. So the captain came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish." Vs. 5-6

Then they said to him, "Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" So he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. Vs. 8-10

And 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 this great tempest is because of me." V. 12

So they picked up Jonah, and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and took vows. V. 15

In the last chapter we looked at the conduct of the heathen sailors during the great storm. We observed the religion of the natural man as he reacts to a life threatening situation. We concluded that while natural revelation is sufficient to condemn men, it is not sufficient to save them. It takes a special revelation of God through His Word and Spirit for men to know God in a personal and saving way.

In this chapter we will go over the same verses again, not looking at the heathen, but at Jonah and the conduct of a believer who is backslidden and running from the known revealed will of God. I do not believe that Jonah was an apostate, but he was a backslider and we will handle him in that way. I would like to draw your attention first to verses 5 and 6 as we look at Jonah's sleep of sorrow in the ship. While the people up on deck are scared to death, Jonah is down below asleep.

As I stated in a previous chapter, many teachers take the position that Jonah's sleep was a display of insensitivity and apathy to the will of God. However, I take the opposite position. It is not because his relationship to God and the will of God were topics of little interest to Jonah -- precisely the reverse is true. By studying closely his character, we can discern that Jonah is a highly sensitive and emotional person who is easily irritated. Later

in chapter 4 of the Book we will see how easily he became upset over the loss of comfort that he received from a gourd, even to the point of directing his irritability and anger toward God. Jonah is definitely not a cool and calm individual. It is not difficult to see that in Jonah's flight from God his thoughts were not calm and collected nor was inner peace possessing his soul. It is evident that a thousand anxieties must have been flooding Jonah's mind during his flight from God making him weary both in mind and soul. He is aware that all is wrong between him and his God. He is also aware of the fact that he has just resigned an honorable ministry. He has turned in his preaching credentials and suffered the loss of his native land - Emmanuel's land. There is nothing facing him in the future but gloom and doom -- nothing but fightings without and fears within. Jonah cannot go to the book or claim the promises of God because he is out of God's will, and there are no comforts to relieve his soul. Jonah's mental anxiety drained his physical energy and landed him in a state of total exhaustion. Sleep overtook his weary body in the same way that the disciples slept for sorrow in Gethsemane while Jesus stayed awake and prayed. It is the teaching of the Bible and the testimony of a believer's conscience that a believer cannot live in a state of known disobedience and be at peace with himself, with others around him and with God over him.

Read David's Psalm of repentance in Psalm 51 and see what he went through in his backslidden condition. Also read how our sins trouble us in Romans 7. We cannot be at peace with ourselves when we are running from God.

The second thing I would look at in Jonah's sleep of sorrow is that Jonah is the last one to know that the storm is upon him. Everyone but Jonah knows that the storm is raging. While we may show charity toward Jonah in his exhausted state, we must not overlook the deplorable effects of being overtaken in a state of disobedience to God. God's chastening hand is about to overtake Jonah. In Isaiah 42:24-25 we read:

Who gave Jacob for plunder, and Israel to the robbers? Was it not the Lord, He against whom we have sinned? For they would not walk in His ways, nor were they obedient to His law. Therefore, He has poured on him the fury of His anger and the strength of battle; It has set him on fire all around, Yet he did not know; And it burned him, Yet he did not take it to heart.

This passage reveals to us that while God was chastening them, Israel was not aware of what was happening or what was yet to happen to them as a nation in the future. I make this observation and I believe that this truth can be applied to a backslider. It is not unusual for others to see the hand of God upon the backslider before the backslider. The backslider himself sees nothing until the crisis hits and God gets his attention.

Now in verses 6 and 8, we find Jonah being rebuked by an unbelieving world. The shipmaster comes to him and says, "What is the meaning of all this you sleepyhead, Arise, call upon your God if so be that God will think upon us so that we perish not." And then the others asked him, ***"Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us?"***

Jonah, as a visible representation of God's people, has now been placed in the presence of an unbelieving society. Whenever believers are among unbelievers, they should attempt to acquaint the unbelievers with the knowledge of the living God. Also, when those who profess to know God do wrong, we may expect to hear from those who do not profess at all. Christians living in a state of disobedience will have others, especially the unbelievers, point it out. The unbelieving world has perverted interest in finding fault with the godly to show that the godly are basically hypocritical and no better than themselves. While the unbelieving world harp upon the failings and the inconsistencies of Christians, they rarely ever criticize their own companions for doing the same things. It is Christians they delight to find fault with because a godly testimony convicts the unsaved. If a Christian's testimony can be destroyed, then the unsaved may have their consciences eased in their sinning.

Having said that, it can now be said that Jonah deserved rebuke from the heathen sea captain for two reasons. First of all Jonah deserved to be rebuked because he omitted the opportunity to bear testimony to the character of his God. There are not only sins of commission, but there are sins of omission. Jonah lost a splendid opportunity to witness to his faith in God. Let's contrast the experience of the Apostle Paul in a very similar situation found in Acts 27:14-25. During a voyage to Italy, the ship was hit by a storm and all of the heathen were afraid they were going to die. Paul stood and said, **"Take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship."** Jonah had that very same opportunity to bear witness unto the faith of the God of heaven and sea. He blew it. How calm and resigned Paul appeared to others when it looked like all hope was gone. When the sea captain asked Jonah, "What do you mean by sleeping during this storm," Jonah could have replied with the words from Psalms 46:1-3.

***God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and
though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the
waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its
swelling.***

Jonah had access to the Psalms. When the sea captain asked him, "Why are you sleeping?" Jonah could have replied with those words, because **"God is our refuge and our strength."** That kind of testimony would have glorified God in the eyes of the heathen sailors. It would have a testimony of the living power of the true God to support and encourage His dependent creatures in all circumstances of life. Paul was able to do that. Jonah could not do it because he was backslidden.

When King Darius came to the mouth of the lion's den where Daniel had just been thrown, he asked Daniel. **"O Daniel, servant of the living God, Is your God whom you**

serve continually able to deliver you from the lions?" What a thrill it was to the king when Daniel's famous answer came forth out of the lion's den, **"O king live forever, I am alive. God sent his angel to shut the mouths of the lions."** Daniel's reply bore testimony to the faithfulness of God. In like manner, Jonah could have been asked like this, "O Jonah, servant of the living God, whom you serve continually, is your God able to give you peace which enables you to sleep in the storm?" Had Jonah been serving his God at the time, he could have replied with the words of Isaiah 26:3: **"You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You."** What an opportunity for Jonah to glorify his God in the midst of a bunch of heathens. However, he lost that opportunity because he was backslidden. Therefore, Jonah deserved to be rebuked by the unbelieving world because he shirked his duty to uphold the glory of God in all of life's circumstances. Secondly, Jonah deserved to be rebuked when he committed a scandalous action that dishonored the character of his God. He not only omitted his testimony but he caused any testimony that he might have had to be disregarded when through his actions he brought scandal on the name of Jehovah God. Jonah's actions were conveying to those around about him that it was an unhappy, grievous and undesirable thing to be called upon to serve the God of heaven and the seas. As they observed his reclusive manners down in the innermost part of the ship, probably consumed with worry, care and anxiety, they could only conclude that Jonah had become like the God he worshiped. Think about that. People look at you and conclude that you are just like the God you worship. Since Jonah was irritable, unsociable, uncongenial, sour, and made an unpleasant and unhappy companion, there was little about him that would make others desirous of getting to know his God. As the world watches your life, does it say, "If you are like your God you can keep Him." Let me reiterate. The unbelieving world should not be able to claim superiority over the people of God in any area of goodness. They should not be able to say that they make better fathers or better mothers. Do they have more social graces of love, kindness, compassion and mercy than you Christians have? Can they say, "We enjoy life and are more happy and at peace with ourselves than you Christians. And yet you Christians are trying to convert us to become like your God. We see your works and the way you approach life and we don't like what we see. You can keep your God for He has obviously made you worse than you were before you converted to His cause." The sea captain rebukes the prophet, a heathen sailor rebukes the preacher, and the world rebukes the church. My brethren these things ought not to be so. Jonah should to be in Nineveh rebuking the sinners instead of the sinners rebuking the preacher.

The next thing we consider about the matter of backsliding is that not only is Jonah omitting an opportunity to witness and he is committing a scandalous sin against his God by his behavior, but thirdly, backsliding shuts the door to true prayer. This is something that is grossly neglected in current preaching. In both Calvinistic and Arminian pulpits people are led to believe that you can live any way you want to, and there will always be

an open door to pray to God. That is not so. Sin shuts the door to prayer. Look at the words, **"Arise, call on your God, perhaps your God will consider us so that we may not perish."** In other words, "Jonah, it is the time to pray, not sleep. Get busy and call upon your God." But Jonah cannot comply with this request, because God refuses to hear the prayer of the impenitent. (cf. Jeremiah 11:7-11; Isaiah 1:15; Hosea 5:15).

While Jonah was a true prophet and servant of the Lord, at the present time he is assuming the position of a rebel before his King. A rebellious spirit closes the door to fellowship with God for **"What communion does light have with darkness?"** (II Corinthians 6:14). In his present flight from God, Jonah has shut the door to true prayer. Because to pray truly in faith, is to pray in submission to the divine will of God and on the authority granted to us in the Word of God. However, for Jonah to attempt to pray in his state of disobedience would expose him to the conviction of his own conscience that he was out of God's will. His attempt to pray was strangled in the very beginning of it. Jonah has the witness in himself against himself. Therefore, not only will the backslider's Bible be collecting dust, but the backslider will find the door to his prayer closet shut and locked, and the sign on that door will read, "for repentant believers only." Only repentant people have the ear of God, not impenitent ones. Read the Word of God in Jeremiah to the impenitent Jews who continued right on sinning against His revealed will.

For I earnestly exhorted your fathers in the day I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, until this day, rising early and exhorting, saying, "Obey My voice. Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone followed the dictates of his evil heart; therefore I will bring upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but which they have not done." And the Lord said to me, "A conspiracy has been found among the men of Judah and among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers who refused to hear My words, and they have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken My covenant which I made with their fathers." Therefore thus says the Lord: "Behold, I will surely bring calamity on them which they will not be able to escape; and though they cry out to Me, I will not listen to them." Jeremiah 11:7-11

Also look at what God spoke to the prophet Isaiah.

When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Isaiah 1:15

Hosea also has words of that same effect. (cf. Hosea 5:15). The nature of true prayer involves a spirit of submission and desire for God's will to be done. That is an important statement. Prayer is an appeal to God to accomplish the things concerning us which He has both purposed and promised, and to carry out His own will in our experience in history.

Prayer is not trying to bring God over to our side to do our will. Therefore, the person who is not following God's will, cannot truly pray. That is, not only does God refuse to hear the prayer of the impenitent, but in reality the impenitent refuses to truly pray. The impenitent cannot pray for God's will to be done. He can only pray for his own will to be done or for God to bless his own will. So backsliding slams the door to true prayer. The first true prayer that comes from the transgressor begins with a resignation of his rebellion. Our coming over to God to ask Him to fulfill His will implies the giving up, the surrendering of our own will to His. This is true because prayer is the offering up of our desires to God for things agreeable to His will. I John 5:14 states: "**Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing according to His will, He hears us.**" Also, 1 John 3:21-22:

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask, we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

It is an obedient person who desires God's will to be done, and prayer is bringing our will over to God's side. The backslider cannot do that. Not only does the backslider find that heaven is brass unto him, he cannot pray right. An obedient servant has fellowship with God; a disobedient one is out of fellowship with God. Jonah is not in friendly communion with God, and for him to attempt to pray as if nothing has happened would be an insult to his God.

Suppose your neighbor stole your lawn mower and both of you knew he did it. How would you feel if he came over and asked to borrow your car? Would that not be the supreme insult? Likewise, how do you think God feels when one of his disobedient servants dares to ask a favor out of Him? We have insulted Him with our disobedience and then we have the nerve to ask a favor out of Him without confessing what we have done.

God's response to such a matter is given in Hosea 5:15: "**I will return again to My place, till they acknowledge their offense. Then they will seek my face; in their affliction they will earnestly seek Me.**" In other words God says, "while they are crying out I am not going to hear, I am going home. I am not going to listen. When I send the affliction, they will start to seek Me." Jonah, you are going to start seeking the face of God real soon and you will learn how to pray. God is not going to hear Jonah until he comes to repentance. Therefore, it appears that repentance is necessarily implied in all true prayer. Jeremiah said, "**And you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.**" (Jeremiah. 29:13). In other words, when we subject all of our will to God's will, then we can delight in God and find God. Then the sovereign God will give you the desires of your heart, because your heart's desires are also God's desires. So I say again,

true prayer is not bringing God over to our side, it is us going to God's side. Jonah cannot go over to God's side as long as he is impenitent. Therefore, without repentance, God will not hear his prayer. It is also just as true, without repenting Jonah cannot truly pray. Let us consider Jonah's hindrance to the work of God. In verse 7 it says **"Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah."** There is an interesting parallel between Jonah in the ship and the account of Achan in the camp of Israel. Jonah's act of disobedience delayed the work of God in Nineveh and caused confusion and discouragement in the lives of others. What do you think the people in Israel thought when their prophet resigned the ministry and left the scene? What about the effect upon Jonah's relatives and his friends when they discovered he had forsaken them and run away to some foreign country? One can only surmise because the scriptures do not give us the answer. However, we do have a similar situation existing between Jonah and another person in Israel's history whose name was Achan. After the conquering of Jericho under Joshua, it appeared that the march of Israel into the land was well on its way. God had promised victory but warned that all the spoils of the battle were to come into the Lord's treasury and that a curse would ensue if anyone even took a souvenir from the battles. Achan disobeyed the command, took certain articles and hid them in the privacy of his tent. When the armies of Israel marched out to capture the next little city of Ai, they were defeated by a small group of defenders and lost thirty-six men in the battle. Both Jonah and Achan's activities affected the lives of others. If you read the chapter carefully, you will find the following things occurred in the lives of God's people when Achan committed his trespass: Because of Achan's sin, you can find fear, lack of confidence, discouragement, despondency, murmuring, and pure unbelief among the people of God. The search for the guilty party was first narrowed to the tribe of Judah. Then they narrowed it down to a family of the Zerahites and a man named Zabdi. Then from his immediate house it was discerned that he had a grandson named Achan who was the guilty party. Achan was then executed along with his family. They took him along with his animals, his possessions and burned them in a heap of fire and covered them with stone. They named the place the Valley of Achor and then the march of Israel continued on into the promised land that God had given unto them.

Space will not allow us to cover all the many parallels and lessons that can be learned from this incident, but the main lesson in the life of Achan is that people can be brought into a low spiritual state of distrust by the actions of one person. In Jonah's case, the message to Nineveh was delayed because Jonah was out of the will of God. In the camp of Israel, the people are confused and are doubting God. There is no spiritual moving of God in the camp because there is an Achan that has got to be dealt with. The actions of one backslider can affect the whole community of people. Romans 14:7 says, **"For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself."** God has ordained that

men are constituted into a political body known as a society and into a spiritual body known as the church. Paul says of the spiritual body, **"The members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually."** The spiritual body is comprised of those who are redeemed and regenerated by the Spirit of God, and as the actions of a single member can affect the life of the body, so the actions of the body can affect the life of a single member. How often has a disobedient preacher held up the ministry of the local church? Likewise, how often has a disobedient church or a disobedient member hindered the ministry of a pastor?

Jonah not only affected others but he endangered the lives of others. In verse 8 it says:

Then they said to him, "Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

The first thing I would note is how Jonah, the backslider, not only affected the lives of other people but also endangered them. When God has a controversy with one individual, and in His pursuing that one individual, others may be exposed to the same danger. The storm was sent to pursue, arrest and punish Jonah, but it affected all who were sailing with him. Also, it is interesting to note that there may have been many more ships and sailors all out there fighting for their lives who did not have the foggiest idea that God was after one backslidden preacher. However, since all have sinned, God can vindicate His righteousness in involving others in the chastisement of Jonah. **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** (Romans 3:23). God is not unjust because He exposes others to danger because they are all sinners alike, but Jonah is the one that God holds responsible for this particular act.

The Bible is full of examples of how the sins of one believer can bring spiritual or physical harm to others. However, I have chosen two examples from the life of David to illustrate my point. David was said to be a man after God's own heart. What a statement, to be a man after God's own heart! Yet, on one occasion when he disobeyed the Lord and numbered the people, he was punished by a pestilence in the land that killed seventy thousand of his own countrymen who were innocent of the particular crime involved. When David realized he had been the source of suffering and death for so many, he cried out, **"Surely I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray be against me and against my father's house."** (II Samuel 24:17). He is asking, "Lord, take this out on me but not upon my countrymen." David saw his actions put all of these thousands of people in their grave. The Bible states that it was seventy thousand people who died.

On another occasion, David brought shame and grief into the life of Bathsheba, destroying her marriage and making her a widow by having her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. When the child was born which was conceived of the adulterous relationship, we read in II Samuel 12:15: **"And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became ill."** The Bible says God struck the baby, not the devil. The baby had not done anything wrong. He was a sinner in Adam, yes, but the baby had not sinned personally or violated some commandment. But David had sinned, and the baby suffered because of the actions of another. Later in the same chapter it says, **"Then on the seventh day it came to pass that the child died."** When David visited the grave of his infant child just seven days old, his thoughts could have been, "There lies my little one, and my sins put him there." A backslidden Christian endangers the lives of other people, whether it is one relative or whether it is a whole society of people. Have you ever considered that when God sends a hurricane to the east coast, the west coast, or the Gulf of Mexico, and hundreds may die, He may be after only one backslidden Christian? God is not mocked by the disobedience of his people. Jonah will go into the sea, and be made an example because of his disobedience. A disobedient Christian is the most dangerous person on the face of the earth to be around. Jonah was a ticking time bomb waiting to explode and bring harm to countless others. He was walking around with a storm cloud over his head that was ready to break forth with the anger of God upon him and those round about him. It is more dangerous to live next door to a backslidden Christian than an unsaved criminal. Why? Because the Bible says, **"For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God. . ."** (I Peter 4:17). This is important theology. God may allow His enemies to be left alone until the final day of judgment, but He must chastise and correct His sons in order that they will persevere into the way of glory and not be condemned with this present world. God may allow His enemies to go through this whole life and never punish them until the day of judgment, but He must correct His people in this present life because His people are not only preserved in Christ they must persevere in Christ to the end. The Bible says, **"My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."** (Hebrews 12:6). God said of Israel, **"You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities."** (Amos 3:2).

In speaking to the disobedient members at the church of Corinth, Paul says, **"For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep."** (I Corinthians 11:30). We are all too prone to interpret that to mean all those that are sick and those that have died are sinning ones. However, there is the possibility that God was touching others of their relatives and friends because there were some impenitent people in the church at Corinth. Both prospects may be true. I reiterate, a backslidden Christian is the

most dangerous person to be around on the face of the earth. God's thunderbolt may be ready to fall. The lesson in all of this for the backslider is that God will conform His people to the obedient image of Christ's moral character, and they will do His will. The modern doctrine of backsliding held by many in a typical Baptist church is that you can live all your life in a backslidden state and die and go to heaven, but you will just lose a few rewards. There is no perseverance in that. The Biblical doctrine is that God will chastise, reprove and rebuke the backslider in this life in order that he not be condemned with the world. (I Corinthians 11:32). Here is a sobering warning. If you can live in sin as a professing Christian without chastisement, it means that you are just a "professing" Christian and not a true child of God. God will chastise His Jonahs whether it be by a storm, a fish, a gourd, or a worm. The sobering thing is that He may take some friends and relatives in the process. As David had to look at the grave of his little seven day old child and realize that his son was in that grave because he would not follow God's way. The actions of your pastor can affect the spiritual progress of your church, and the actions of a church in its spirituality or lack thereof can affect the ministry of its pastor. One person in a church who is out of the will of God and running from God like Jonah, can affect the ministry of the pastor and hinder the whole ministry of a church at the same time.

This is hard doctrine. It is not easy to proclaim a message like this. While God may deal in one way with the heathen on the ship, He will deal in another way with Jonah on the ship. If you, like Jonah, are out of the will of God, it is but a matter of time until the storm catches up with you. Others may already see it on the horizon, even though you do not. Even though the heathen sailors were spiritually blind, they realized that Jonah needed to call upon his God and pray to Him. They wondered why Jonah was running from a God who Jonah claimed had created the heavens, earth and sea.

How can we know if we are backslidden? Here is a very simple rule of thumb. If there is ever a time in which that you felt you were closer to God than what you are today, you are backslidden. If there was ever a time you felt you were communing with Him in the word and prayer, serving Him, and enjoying the fellowship of God's people more than you are today, you are backslidden. That is why you are not reading your Bible and praying. That is why you are not enjoying the presence of God's people, seeking them out and asking questions and advice. The storm is coming and others may see it when you do not. Jonah, (Christians) do you not know that you cannot outrun God or hide from Him? What do you mean by living like this? The world is rebuking you. You are bringing confusion and disorder to God's people, and you are endangering the lives of friends and relatives. Jonah, what in the world do you mean by saying that you are a Hebrew and you believe in the God of heaven and earth and yet you are acting worse than we are. Jonah, wake up. Arise and get right with God.

May God's way be made with us before we have to end up in the belly of a great fish where He will get His way. God will have His way and He will bring every one of us as His people to His way.