

Out of Death Comes Life
Jonah 1:11-16; John 12:24
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We hear so often with great sorrow and indignation how so many churches are using every worldly means possible to fill the pews with warm bodies. Methods used by churches to hold the attention of church-goers and to increase their numbers sadly tell us in whom and in what such churches are trusting to build the Church of Christ—they're trusting in their own ability to entertain, amuse, and make people feel good about themselves. "Give them something to laugh about in sermons, give them music that will sound very much like that to which they dance and sway with their friends, give them skits and movies that will keep their interest, and give them activities every night of the week that will keep them coming back again and again for fun and games." But, dear ones, such methods are the not the narrow way of the Lord that leads to life, but are rather the broad path of the world that leads to destruction.

Dear ones, we are not to trust in ourselves or in our own imaginative, worldly methods to lead others to Christ or to grow the Church of Christ. We are to trust in Christ to grow His own Church according to the ways in which He Himself has appointed in His Word (for He has promised, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" Matthew 16:18). Nor are we to trust in our own innovative and creative songs, hymns, music, instruments, choirs, holy days, or any bells and whistles in order to please a Most Holy God in worship. We are simply to obey Christ's scriptural commands out of faith and love as we approach Him in worship through our only Mediator, Jesus Christ.

Dear ones, one of the most important ways in which to lead others to Christ and to grow the Church of Christ with men, women, and children who hunger and thirst for Christ is a way that is never mentioned by such entertainment centers, which scandalously call themselves churches. What is that divinely appointed way to lead others to Christ and to grow the Church of Christ with people who desire to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ? It is the way of death. "What!" someone may say. "The way of death? But Pastor, I thought you said you were going to present for us the way to grow the Church of Christ, not the way to diminish and destroy the Church of Christ. How is the way of death going to grow us individually, familiarly, and corporately as Christ's Church?" That is precisely what we will be examining from our text in the Book of Jonah this Lord's Day, so stay tune. For we shall see from today's text that out of death the Lord brings life: Life to individuals, life to families, life to churches, and life to nations who by God's grace die to themselves. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The Necessity of Death Exhibited (Jonah 1:11-15); (2) The Blessing of Life Manifested (Jonah 1:16).

I. The Necessity of Death Exhibited (Jonah 1:11-15).

A. As we continue with the inspired, historical narrative of that hurricane-like storm that threatened to crush the ship of sailors and passengers upon which Jonah sailed, we see that the captain and sailors now have come to a place where they stare death square in the face. They know that Jonah is the direct cause for the calamity they face; for, as you recall, the lot had fallen upon Jonah (Jonah 1:7), and he had confessed to them that the life-threatening storm was God's means of pursuing him for having fled the revealed will of God in going to preach to the Gentiles in the capital city of the Assyrians in Nineveh (Jonah 1:10). With death knocking at the door of everyone on that ship, the captain and crew approach Jonah with a question: "What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us" (Jonah 1:11)?

1. The fact that Jonah had as it were the very finger of God pointed in his face through the casting of the lot, "Thou art the man"; and the fact that Jonah did not deny that he was the man, but humbly confessed he was indeed the man upon whose account God had sent the hurricane-like storm; neither the lot identifying Jonah, nor Jonah's confession caused the storm to abate or to calm in the least. In fact, the Scripture goes on to state the reason why the crew asked Jonah what should be done: "for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous" (Jonah 1:11). In other words, the sea grew more and more tempestuous (which is the emphasis of the Hebrew verbs used here). It raged all the more. Perhaps, the crew had assumed that since Jonah had confessed his sin in faith and repentance that the God of heaven and earth and of the seas whom Jonah served would on that account bring an immediate calm. But such was not the case. To the contrary, it grew worse (if that were possible), and so the crew of the ship cry out in desperation to Jonah, the prophet of the Most High God, "What shall we do" (Jonah 1:11)? With death nipping at their heels, they turn to God's prophet, Jonah.

2. Dear ones, here we begin to see God working that spiritual principle of life out of death in this most desperate situation in which those on board this ship were facing death. For as the fear of death begins to encompass them, they begin to look outside of themselves for help from Almighty God whose prophet Jonah is. They have come to the place in which they know they cannot save themselves from impending death. They see their own hopelessness and helplessness to save themselves. And that is precisely the first step to which we must all come (or anyone must come) if we are ever to know the life and salvation of the Lord. Dear ones, we as sinners who have offended our Holy God by the first sin of Adam in which we have partaken, by our corrupt nature which we have inherited from Adam, and by our own personal sin against God's holy commandments, must see that we are on the precipice and brink of everlasting death. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot bargain with God, "God, you do your part, and I will do my part in my salvation." No, no, no, a thousand times, no. Our part is not to share in our salvation by our own works of righteousness, or by any good thing within us. All that is left for us in our helpless estate is to cry out to the Lord as these sailors did and as the Philippian jailor did unto the apostle Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" And then we must hear the answer of the Lord, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31). Dear ones, the essence of saving faith is not doing something to contribute to your salvation, but rather the essence of saving faith is resting in what Christ has done for sinners through His perfect obedience which is accounted to you for righteousness through faith alone and resting in His perfect sacrifice on the cross which is accounted to you for a full pardon of all your sin through faith alone. The glory of salvation belongs to the Lord from beginning to end, not to man, lest anyone should boast. "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). Out of death comes life.

B. Jonah's response to the question of the sailors is found in verse 12: "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you."

1. Jonah's response to be cast into the sea as the means by which all the heathen, idol worshippers on the ship would be saved from death in this storm was not the reply of a suicidal, depressed maniac, but was, I submit, the reply of God's prophet speaking as the mouthpiece of God. If Jonah was suicidal and overcome with depression, he would have simply thrown himself overboard in resigning himself to self-destruction. But suicide was and always is a sin contrary to the Sixth Commandment (wherein we are required not only to preserve the life of others, but also to preserve our own life as well). And as we shall see, it was necessary that Jonah not die by his own hands, but rather die voluntarily a violent death at the hands of others. For as a prophet of God, it was not merely himself or even those on the ship with him that were to be instructed by the subsequent events that occurred. But I submit that it was God's revealed will to Jonah, the prophet of God, that he be cast into the sea by the hands of others for our instruction, for our edification, and for our growth in grace and increase in faith (1 Corinthians 10:11).

2. Dear ones, I would suggest that the increasing rage of the storm at this point was not due to God yet pursuing a fugitive and unrepentant prophet. In fact, Jonah has now already been pursued and captured by the grace of God. Jonah has already been brought to the point of confession of his sin, repentance in eyeing the mercy of God in Christ, and renewed obedience to the revealed will of God (in Jonah 1:9-10). God has pursued and caught His prodigal child. Thus, we ask, "Why then does the storm increase in intensity and ferocity even after his confession and repentance?" Let me suggest three reasons.

a. The first reason why the storm increases in intensity and ferocity (even after Jonah's confession and repentance) is for the benefit of Jonah. Jonah had reaped the whirlwind (or rather hurricane) of God's loving yet stern discipline for his rebellion against God's revealed will in not going to Nineveh, but now that Jonah has repented, God in His loving yet stern discipline continues to teach Jonah that he must be ready to obey (even to the point of his own life) what the Lord now reveals to him (i.e. God reveals to Jonah that he is to cast himself into the sea, for as I said previously, it was not Jonah's idea to be cast into the sea, but rather God's command to do so). The increasing rage of the storm was to remind Jonah and to instruct Jonah (and to instruct us all) of the consequences of rebelling against what God has revealed in His Word (and especially when God has illuminated our minds to understand what our duty is in obeying Him). In other words, Jonah, (I would submit) is not being punished for a past sin (since he confessed it, repented of it, and thus was forgiven), but is being lovingly taught by the Lord that an even greater challenge to obey the revealed will of God now awaits him (in his trust and obedience to God that he be cast into the sea of death). So the Lord will do for us likewise. When God's severe chastening hand pursues us and captures us in love, and we confess our sin, seek His fatherly pardon, repent and renew our obedience, the Lord may continue that trial or affliction in our life, not in order to bring the prodigal to repentance, but to teach and instruct us that we must avoid falling back into that rebellion against His revealed will (this appears to be the reason for Paul's thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12:7).

b. The second reason why the storm increases in intensity and ferocity (even after Jonah's confession and repentance) is for the benefit of the heathen, idolatrous sailors. The sailors had already tried everything at their disposal to counter this supernatural storm. You will recall that they had cast overboard any and everything they could in order to save the ship and their own lives (in Jonah 1:5), but to no avail. They also try by means of their own human resources to steer the ship toward land, hoping that a harbor or land-break of some kind might break the wind to some degree and save the ship and their own lives (in Jonah 1:13), but once again to no avail. These sailors needed to see and understand that there was no salvation possible through their own human efforts to save themselves. They needed to be brought to the point of casting themselves entirely upon Jehovah God for their salvation (which we must also do, as noted above).

c. The third reason why the storm increases in intensity and ferocity (even after Jonah's confession and repentance) is for the benefit and encouragement of us all who trust in Christ alone for our eternal salvation. For it was necessary that the hurricane-like storm increase in rage so that Jonah might be cast overboard into the violent sea in order that these heathen idolaters from the nations that were aboard that ship might be saved, which in God's most amazing plan was to typify (by way of a graphic and historical illustration) Christ's willing obedience to God's will that he suffer a violent death on behalf of chosen sinners of all nations (even the chief of sinners). Had the Lord immediately brought a peace and calm to the Mediterranean Sea upon Jonah's confession and repentance, there would not have been here in Jonah an Old Testament type and picture for us to see in pointing to the even greater obedience and humiliation of Christ, the Son of God, in suffering God's holy wrath for undeserving sinners like you and me. Such types and pictures only confirm for us that what we hold in our hands is the inspired Word of God, for it points (from beginning to end to the Lamb of God who was slain from before the foundation of the world, Revelation 13:8).

C. Now we see much more clearly how the raging storm in its growing intensity drives the sailors to look outside of themselves to the God of the Bible as they pray, “We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O LORD, has done as it pleased thee” (Jonah 1:14).

1. These heathen idolaters now clearly turn from appealing to their gods to whom they originally prayed in Jonah 1:5 to appealing to the one true God of the Bible (for when they mention the name of the LORD, they are using the unique, covenant name of God, translated into English either as JEHOVAH or YAHWEH). Through the power of God seen in the heavens and upon the seas, and especially through the verbal testimony of Jonah that the God of Israel, JEHOVAH, is the one true eternal sovereign God, these Gentiles are now driven by God’s Spirit from a sense of their own helplessness and despair to cry out to God, concerning whom they testify that He has done as it pleased Him—not as it pleased them, not as it pleased Jonah, but as it pleased Him. Do you remember the testimony of a humbled Nebuchadnezzar who had been stricken by God with a dementia so powerful that he wandered in the wild like a beast for seven years? When Nebuchadnezzar was restored to his right mind we read of his powerful testimony in Daniel 4:34-35.

2. Dear ones, what will it take in your life and mine for us to not only give lip-service to the doctrine of God’s absolute sovereignty over all things in heaven and upon earth, but as God’s beloved children to rest confidently and securely in that absolute sovereignty knowing day by day that God does whatever pleases Him? Can you out of a growing faith and complete confidence place into the most wise, most holy, and most loving hands of your sovereign God and Savior your wife, your husband, your children, your parents, your job, your financial provision, your personal lives and your salvation? Dear ones, if the truth of God’s absolute control over all that occurs in heaven and on earth does not bring you peace and comfort, it is to some degree because you proudly want to exercise that control over your life that alone belongs to God, and because you do not completely trust Him to do what is best for you (in either case, whether it is pride or doubt, it needs to be confessed, forgiven, and nailed to the cross of Christ to be mortified daily in your life). And dear ones, never forget that what is best for you is always that which will glorify Christ the most. Beloved children of God, let’s learn to let God be God, just as these heathen sailors were then learning by God’s amazing grace to trust in the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

D. We now come to the climactic event in exhibiting the necessity of death—Jonah is cast overboard into the sea of death: “So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth unto the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging” Jonah 1:15. Here we see ever so clearly that out of Jonah’s figurative death in the sea, came forth life to the heathen sailors. For the sea IMMEDIATELY goes from huge waves that engulfed the ship to a smooth ripple of the waves on a calm sea. The wind that blew with such forceful gales that it nearly crushed the ship IMMEDIATELY became a beautiful calm breeze caressing the bodies of the sailors. And all this happened IMMEDIATELY (not gradually) when Jonah was cast into the sea. If there was any doubt at all in the sailors that the God of Israel was the one true God that created and controlled the heavens, the earth, and the sea (and all that is in the heavens, the earth, and the sea), the Lord in all His glory responds to any lingering doubt the sailors may have had. And if the God of Israel created and controls all things (including the destiny of all people), He alone must be able to forgive sin and give everlasting life. The Spirit of God was at work in the lives of these sailors through the faithful testimony of Jonah, and was at work in answering the prayers of the sailors that had been offered to the one true God, JEHOVAH. But, dear ones, don’t miss this point: Life came to the sailors by means of Jonah being cast into the sea of death. Just as the whale by which Jonah was swallowed for three days was a typical figure of the grave by which Christ was swallowed for three days (according to Christ in Matthew 12:40), so the sea of death into which Jonah was cast was a typical figure of the cross of death upon which the Lord Jesus Christ suffered in order to bring everlasting life to many by His grace alone.

II. The Blessing of Life Manifested (Jonah 1:16).

A. But, dear ones, the saving of the mere physical life of these Gentile sailors was not the greatest demonstration of life out of death, but rather the saving of their corrupt souls and raising their souls from death unto life was the most glorious demonstration of the principle of life out of death, as we read in Jonah 1:16: “Then the men feared the LORD [JEHOVAH—GLP] exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD [JEHOVAH—GLP], and made vows.” The outward demonstration of their fear of JEHOVAH was that they worshipped the one true living God by means of sacrifices and vows to own JEHOVAH as their God, who is not only the God of Israel, but who is the God of Gentiles and Gentile nations as well. Dear ones, if the Lord can bring life to heathen idolaters by means of Jonah’s being cast into the sea of death, how much more can and will the Lord by means of His death on the cross bring life to you who trust Him and to all nations of the world?

B As I close today, I would like to leave you with three applications.

1. The first application is one already made, but now tied in with the words of Christ in John 12:24 and its primary reference to Christ in John 12:32 in drawing “all men” i.e. not only Jews, but the Gentiles as well. Here is the means by which Christ grows His Church—through the faithful proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is by the “foolishness of preaching” (according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18) and not by the wisdom, innovation, creativity, or works of man that Christ builds and grows His Church. This is Christ’s church growth method—out of the death of Christ comes life to the world.

2. The second application is more personal. Just as Christ needed to die in order to bring forth life to the world, so also we must die in order to see life produced in our lives and in the lives of those around us. Dear ones, we rejoice in hearing how the Lord Jesus Christ through His death has earned for us and graciously granted to us the forgiveness of sin and everlasting life. We hope in the goodness of the Lord that through the death of Christ the life of Christ will be brought to all nations in the time of millennial blessing. Oh, we rejoice in the death of Christ, but do we also rejoice that Christ’s death means our death. His death and suffering on the cross to remove sin means that we must die daily, take up our own cross, deny ourselves, and follow Him (Matthew 16:24)? But how do we die? We die daily, dear ones, by looking to the righteousness of Christ as our only ground of justification and sanctification before God. We die daily by offering our lives to the Lord as a living sacrifice and refusing to be conformed to the image of this corrupt and sinful world (Romans 12:1-2). We die daily reckoning Christ’s death for our sin to be our death to sin and His resurrection to life to be our resurrection to righteousness (Romans 6). We die daily by denying ourselves what we think we need in this life so badly, until the Lord so wills to grant it to us by His grace at His appointed time (whether it’s a dream of ours, a home we want to buy, a job or career we desire to have, marriage and children that we cannot presently have in God’s good providence, healing from a chronic disease). Dying daily is not easy. Death to the old man is a struggle for us all because the old man does not want to die. But our hope is not in our ability to crucify the old man, but in Christ and His Covenant of Grace wherein we have already legally and covenantally died with Christ. And so it is absolutely assured that we shall die to the old man (gradually here and finally on the last day). Out of our own spiritual death to sin comes spiritual life in righteousness.

3. The last application is this: Even as Christians the certainty of our own death ought to produce within us a desire to live and bear fruit for the Lord Jesus Christ now. The certainty of death ought to drive us daily to Christ to fall upon His mercy that we would be careful, watchful, and vigilant in order that temptation not overtake us because we are spiritually sleepy, spiritually apathetic and lukewarm, spiritually neglectful of Christ and His means of grace, or even spiritually rebellious. Whatever your besetting sins as a Christian, is it your earnest desire to be in a state of being swallowed by that sin when death comes knocking at your door, or to be growing (not sinlessly perfect, but growing) in the grace and knowledge of Christ, and

nailing those besetting sins to the cross? May that constantly be our prayer. May death constantly issue forth in abundant life in our lives by the amazing death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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