

Jonah 1:1-3  
Who Fears the LORD?

Good morning church...

Last Sunday we began our five-week series in the OT book of Jonah. The book of Jonah is not about a fish but about the character and purposes of God and his Christ. The book of Jonah is also about God's people. In Jonah's day, God's people are the nation Israel. In our day, God's people are the church. Us. Jonah is about us.

**Before we look at our passage, let me pray for us again.**

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**Introduction**

I recently finished the TV series *The Mentalist*. (Don't judge me!) Patrick Jane is the name of the main character. Jane is very skilled at observing the world around him and the people around him. He's incredibly aware and attentive. Unlike me. As I watched the show, I was confronted by my lack of awareness. Compared to Patrick Jane, I'm unaware and inattentive. I'm asleep to the world around me and the people around me. Which got me thinking about my relationship to Jesus. Am I asleep to him like so many other things in my life?

It's the basic question in our passage today. Who's awake and who's asleep, spiritually speaking? And it forces us to ask ourselves this question. Are we awake to Jesus or are we just going through the motions? As we'll see, being spiritually awake is more than knowing the right things in your head or knowing the right things to say.

So, Jonah 1:4-16 asks, "who's spiritually awake and who's asleep?" Let's see how our passage answers this question.

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**1. The Lord's Storm (1:4a)**

Let's begin in verse 1.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." (Jon. 1:1)

Notice that the word LORD is in all caps. It's a signal to English readers that something is going on the Hebrew. L-O-R-D is not the generic word for "God" but the personal name – the covenant name for the God of Israel. Yahweh. That Yahweh revealed his name to Israel speaks of an intimate and personal relationship with his people. This is a significant detail as the narrative unfolds. As New Covenant people, the name of God is Father, Son, and Spirit. The One God revealed in three persons. Again, it's not just the generic word for "God" but his personal name.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. (Jon. 1:2-3)

Jonah boards the ship to go as far away from Nineveh as possible. Nineveh was east of Israel. Tarshish was the western edge of the known world. Not because he's afraid to go, but because he doesn't want mercy for Nineveh. His vision of what God should do and how his life should go conflicts with God's vision. So, Jonah boards the ship at Joppa. And the ship sets sail.

But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. (Jon. 1:4)

Jonah runs. Yahweh pursues. Yahweh pursues him in mercy. It's a severe mercy. But mercy, nonetheless. Yahweh hurls a great wind upon the sea like a javelin thrower hurls a javelin. And Yahweh doesn't miss his target.

It's worth noting at the outset. Jonah's sin was private. It was between him and Yahweh. But Jonah's sin brings a storm to all those in the ship. In our culture, we

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tend to think that private sin doesn't hurt anyone else. You know, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." I think that's incredibly naïve. At the very least, private sins affect who we are and who we are becoming. And the person we are and become is always interacting with others. For good or harm. And so, even our private sin affects others. Maybe not immediately. But over time our private sins always tend to find us out (Num. 32:23) and then find others out. Jonah's did. He brings a storm to these unsuspecting sailors.

## 2. The Sailor's Response (1:5a)

Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. (Jon. 1:5a)

The sailors have seen storms before. Tons of them. But they've never seen anything like this. They're awake to the danger and to the fact that there's something different about this storm. So, they take action. They pray. "Each cried out to his god." They were polytheists. They believed that there were many gods. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. So, they use the shotgun approach to prayer. You take your god, I'll take mine. Everybody picks a god and prays. Hopefully, they'll get lucky and somebody will pick the right one! They pray.

And they hurl cargo. Just as Yahweh "hurled" the wind, so the sailors "hurl" the cargo overboard. This is a significant act. Tossing their cargo away means tossing their dollars away. These seasoned sailors sense they are in a desperate situation. And they're wide awake to what's going on.

But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. (Jon. 1:5b)

The sailors engage in frantic activity. While Jonah is asleep. It's the first of many contrasts. Yahweh pursues Jonah through the storm. And who's paying attention? Not the prophet who heard God's call but the sailors who don't know Yahweh.

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Jonah's "going down" is like a red thread in this first chapter. It's symbolic of Jonah's spiritual descent. He went down to the cargo hold – the deepest part of the ship. Then, he laid down. Which evokes images of the grave, the underworld, and death. It speaks to Jonah's spiritual apathy. He's asleep. Indifferent and unresponsive to Yahweh.

### 3. The Captain's Call (1:6)

So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish." (Jon. 1:6)

As Jonah rubs the sleep from his eyes, he hears the words, "Arise, call out..." These words ring a big bell. They are the same words God used when commissioning Jonah: "Arise...call out against Nineveh." Jonah can run but he can't hide. He can't escape God's call.

The captain tells Jonah to call out to his god. Maybe your god will hear and help. More irony. The prophet has to be reminded to pray by pagan sailors. When asking "who's spiritually awake and who's asleep," prayer is one indication. Those who pray are aware of their need. Those who pray are aware that God is there. Those who pray are aware that God cares. Those who pray are aware that God acts.

### 4. Jonah Singled Out (1:7)

Even after the captain confronts Jonah, he's still not forthcoming. Think about it. The ship is about to break up. The cargo has been dumped. The sailors are praying.

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Jonah knows who is to blame and he says nothing. Since Jonah isn't talking and their prayers aren't working, the sailors decide to try another approach.

And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.  
(Jon. 1:7)

**5. The Sailor's Interrogate (1:8)**

Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" (Jon.1:8)

Five questions. All designed to reveal the identity of the offended god.

**6. Jonah Speaks (1:9)**

Finally, Jonah speaks.

And 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." (Jon. 1:9)

The sailors expect a local god but instead they get the big One! Yahweh. God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land. The one true God who made everything; who rules everything; who every person knows by the testimony of their heart. The apostle Paul says,

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:19-20)

Jonah tells them about the true God. The One they knew by the testimony of their heart. But let's back up a second. Jonah says, "I fear Yahweh." The word "fear"

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means “worship” or “reverence.” Really, this idea of the “fear of Yahweh” is multi-faceted. It includes reverence, awe, respect, love, and a fear of knowing I am accountable to Yahweh. To fear Yahweh is to be awake, attentive, and responsive to him.

When I worked at Boeing, I had a supervisor who I really admired. He was not only smart but wise, fair, and caring. He took interest in me and really tried to help me develop and grow. He fought for me when it came time for raises. Yet I had a healthy fear that I was accountable to him for the work I did. My performance affected his goals for the team and his reputation within our department. I was awake, attentive, and responsive to him. That’s something like the fear of Yahweh.

Now, here’s the question. When Jonah says, “I fear Yahweh” how does that hit you? I know how it hits me: “Yeah, right. You don’t fear Yahweh.”

Jonah says he fears Yahweh. But he doesn’t *actually* fear Yahweh. There’s a deep contradiction between his words and his behavior. I mean, it’s obvious. Don’t you think? And here’s what’s so frightening about this passage. Jonah’s spiritual apathy is obvious to everyone but Jonah! And so, we’re forced to ask the question about ourselves. Could this be me? Could I be Jonah? And if you believe this couldn’t be you, it only proves you’re asleep.

## 7. The Sailors Fear Yahweh (1:10)

Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. (Jon. 1:10)

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Literally, the Hebrew says, “The men feared with a great fear.” Their fear is contrasted with Jonah’s. Jonah says he fears Yahweh. But these guys are beginning to actually fear Yahweh. The phrase “What is this that you have done?!” is always used of moral outrage. The men are beside themselves. “Jonah, how could you run from Yahweh – the God of heaven – who made the sea and put all of us in danger?”

**8. Sailors Ask for a Solution (1:11-12)**

Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” (Jon. 1:11-12)

We almost expect them to grab Jonah and throw him overboard. But they don’t. These men show they fear Yahweh by how they treat Jonah. There’s always a connection between the actual fear of Yahweh and the way treat others. If we’re awake, attentive, and responsive to Yahweh it will impact the way we treat those created in his image. How we talk to them. How we listen to them. How we care for them. What we do to them. What do these men do with Jonah? They ask him for a solution.

Basically, Jonah says, kill me. I’ll be the sacrifice. And we think, maybe Jonah is finally waking up? Is this self-sacrifice? Or, would Jonah rather die than go to Nineveh and preach mercy to his enemies?

The text doesn’t really say. But here’s my thought. If Jonah was really motivated by self-sacrifice, he could have repented. He could have simply agreed to go to Nineveh. The ambiguity in the text forces us to think about our own motives. It forces us to confront our own mixed motives. It forces us to admit we don’t even understand our own hearts.

**9. The Solution Ignored (1:13)**



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Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. (Jon. 1:13)

The men are unwilling to take such drastic action. They don't want responsibility for taking Jonah's life. The men have compassion on Jonah. They first attempt to row back to land. But their efforts are futile because the storm grows more intense. It's an important point. Yahweh's control over creation allows for no human solution. Yahweh's will with Jonah will be done.

**10. The Sailors Pray to Yahweh (1:14)**

Therefore they called out to the LORD, "O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you." (Jon. 1:14)

The men realize their solution won't work. And so, they do the only thing they can: they cry out to Yahweh! Ironically, it's the first prayer offered to Yahweh.

And for these men, it's a very different prayer than in verse 5. Previously, they use a shotgun approach. Cover every god they can think of. Now, their prayer is focused on Yahweh. Previously, we only hear mention of prayer. Now, there is specific content. These men are awake, attentive, and responsive to Yahweh.

Who's awake and who's asleep? Who fears Yahweh? The contrast between Jonah's confessed fear and the sailor's actual fear is nearly complete.

**11. Jonah is Sacrificed (1:15)**

So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. (Jon. 1:15)

The sea responds immediately. The "raging" ceases. Jonah was sacrificed to save the sailors. In the NT, Jesus speaks of the "sign of Jonah" and calls himself "greater

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than Jonah” (Matt. 12:41). Jonah was sacrificed to save the sailors. Jesus would die to save us. Jonah’s sacrifice calmed the storm. Jesus’ sacrifice would calm the storm of God’s wrath against our sin.

The sin behind all our sin is spiritual apathy. We don’t fear God. Though God has revealed himself clearly, we fail to honor him or give him thanks.

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him... (Rom. 1:19-21a)

Every person knows God by the testimony of their heart. So, every person is without excuse. Here’s the thing. Spiritual apathy isn’t just an unfortunate condition. It’s rebellion, suppression, and the height of arrogance. And it brings the storm of God’s wrath. It’s called unrighteousness and ungodliness. And we read that,

the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. (Rom. 1:18)

The storm of God’s wrath is coming. We’re told that **“it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.”** But there is a way of escape. God has graciously provided a solution in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Listen. The sailors aren’t saved by what they do but by what God does. Jonah was a substitute for the sailors. He was sacrificed so that the sailors could be saved from the storm. We aren’t saved by what we do but by what God does. Jesus is greater than Jonah in that his substitutionary sacrifice saves us from the storm of his wrath.

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Jesus is our substitute in life and in death. **Jesus absorbs our spiritual apathy and gives us spiritual life.**

But it requires a response. The sailors turned and staked their lives on the sacrifice of Jonah. We must turn and stake our lives on the sacrifice of Jesus.

So, Jonah's sacrifice calms the raging sea.

## 12. The Sailors Worship (1:16)

Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. (Jon. 1:16)

The text doesn't spell it out, but these men appear to be converted. They experience an awakening to the goodness, power, mercy, grace, beauty, and wrath of the true God. These men don't just say they fear Yahweh, they actually fear Yahweh. The sailor's fear has intensified and shifted from sheer terror to awestruck fear for Yahweh! And they act on this fear. True reverence and respect for Yahweh always results in tangible action.

And so, the answer to the question "who fears Yahweh?" is complete. At least in this story.

**But what about your story? How do we wake up spiritually?**

I wish I could give you a three-step plan to being spiritually awake. I wish I had that for myself. I think it's a real problem. For all of us. It's so easy to go through the motions. It's so easy to know a lot of theology. It's so easy to say the right things.

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Here's the thing. You might be Jonah in the lives of those around you. You might be the one who brings a storm. And you may not even know it. How do you wake up? How do I wake up?

I think I can say this much. The answer is not within us. The answer is not do more, try harder, be better. The sailors didn't come awake by doing something but by having something done to them. God reveals himself to them and provides a sacrifice for them. It's all about grace. It's not about waking up to something we need to do but waking up to what God has done. On the cross, **Jesus absorbs your spiritual apathy and gives you his spiritual life.** Is this message of grace so familiar that you're no longer amazed by it? Are you so asleep to your need that the grace of Jesus no longer thrills your heart? I don't know much. But I know we don't need more to do. What we need most is to wake up to our need. We need to wake up to what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

At GCF, we want to be a place where we are waking up to our need and to what God has done.

### **Conclusion**

Who fears Yahweh? Who's spiritually awake and who's asleep?

Surprisingly, it's the religious guy who's asleep and the irreligious who come awake. It's a sobering message for us.

But God isn't finished with Jonah. In God's relentless mercy and grace, he keeps pursuing Jonah. That's our hope too. It's not what the sailors do, but what God does. It's

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not what Jonah will do, but what God does. And for us, it's not what we do but what God, in Christ, does.