

THE UGLY SIDE OF FEAR

(JONAH)

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Cast your mind back to church last Sunday.

You arrived early, bible in hand, ready to go. You said a quick 'hi' to Sally and Tim, who were trying to pour grape juice from a large bottle into inordinately small cups. But being a good minister of the pew, you were on the lookout for someone new.

In God's kindness, the opportunity presented itself. A man wandered in. He looked a little out of place, and not as nice as the young family you met the week before. No-one has introduced themselves yet.

Your heart starts to beat a little faster, and you suddenly remember the important conversation you need to have with your bible study co-leader Tracey about this week's study. You hesitate, other avoidance strategies forming in your mind. A range of awkward interactions with the man play out in your mind, spiralling into his probable responses to box six of *Two Ways to Live*. In the end, you nod hello and head into the service, hoping that someone else might notice this man.

Evaluating fear in evangelism:

What I've just described is an instance where fear inhibited evangelism.

'Fear' is a word that we use to describe a feeling of unease, anxiety or apprehension about the outcomes of a situation. Fear may involve physical symptoms (e.g. sweating, fast breathing) as well as behaviours such as avoidance. It is sometimes associated with evangelism.

However, the issue I want to explore here is not whether we fear evangelism. I take it that many of us do. I'm more

interested in what you do after an experience like this.

After an interaction like the one above, do you ever stop and think about what's going on, and why you responded the way that you did?

In a society that is wrestling with the issue of mental health in its population, there has been a drive to understand fear, and a tendency to normalise some fear (e.g. when a tiger is chasing you) in order to distinguish it from the condition of anxiety (ongoing feelings of fear without a clear cause or reason).¹ Alongside a host of other factors, it seems to me that this makes it difficult for Christians to work out what to do with feelings of fear and avoidance around evangelism. The question can become whether feelings of fear are rational or overwhelming, rather than about whether they are godly or sinful.

What I want to suggest here, is that ongoing evaluation and interrogation of the thoughts and feelings we experience evangelising is essential for Christians, because fear can reflect sin.

While fear may be common, and even sometimes appropriate, I want to show from Jonah one instance of a seemingly rational fear, that really stemmed from an ugly, sinful heart, for our benefit, as those who sometimes fear on the other side of the cross (1 Peter 3:14-17; 2 Timothy 1:8-12).

Evaluating Jonah's fear:

1. Jonah fled because he feared God's mercy (Jonah 3:10-4:5)

Let's begin in chapter four. Jonah, after a delay involving a boat, a storm and a big fish, has fulfilled his God given task of preaching judgment upon wicked Nineveh. In a surprise happy ending, the Ninevites have genuinely repented and God has relented from destroying them.

Except there is a fourth chapter. This helps us understand the purpose of the book, which is more about the conflict between Jonah's character and God's, rather than the repentance of the Ninevites. So Jonah, grumpily sitting on a hill overlooking the still-intact city, prays:

"O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding

in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." (Jonah 4:2)

The darkness of Jonah's heart here is astonishing. In chapter 1, we learnt that Jonah did not fear the storm, nor the waves, nor even death – though he did 'fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land' (Jonah 1:9). But here we see that his fear was not of God's might, or even his wrath, but his compassion. Jonah fled because he feared God's mercy.

What a warning that holds for us who want to normalise fear. Fear can reflect a corrupt attitude to God's character. It can be sinful. It can be astonishingly wretched.

2. Jonah's sinful fear is not obvious from the beginning (Jonah 1:1-3)

However, did you notice that the author waits until the end of the story to reveal the source of Jonah's fear and flight? In fact, chapter four is an appropriate close to the story because it resolves a puzzle generated in chapter one: was Jonah's flight to Tarshish all that bad?

There are early hints that Jonah's flight, was silly, if not outright sinful. He disobeyed a direct instruction from God. However, we are a long way from the darkness of heart that emerges in chapter four. In fact, Jonah is almost pitiable. He has the very unfortunate job of

being sent as a kind of prophet-missionary, to a nasty people who might kill him. Surely a bit of fear is fair enough!

However, as the story progresses, we see hints that something is amiss. Jonah sleeps, instead of fearing the storm. He is calm, when the sailors are terrified. He 'fears God' but is not worried about his judgment. He prays, but without real repentance. He flees Nineveh, then brazenly declares its overthrow.

All these moments are hints that Jonah's flight was actually very bad. But the depths of his sin are not obvious from the beginning. Jonah's sin is most revealed at the end of the story, not the start.

Evaluating our fear:

For us who are slow to reflect on why we fear, the way the author gradually unveils Jonah's fear is really important. It's not just a good storytelling technique. I think the gradual reveal reflects an appeal to the reader to 'examine themselves' (2 Cor 13:5; Gal 6:4). It invites us, as those having received mercy, to consider our attitudes towards those who need mercy (Luke 15:31-32; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20). To stop when we fear, reflect and pray.

Evaluating your fear:

I'm hopeful that next time a newcomer walks through the door of your church you won't be paralysed by fear. But if you are, will you stop, reflect and pray? Here's what it might look like:

1. Stop. Don't assume everything is fine because being afraid of evangelism is commonplace.

2. Reflect. Think about what happened. What were you worried about? Were there particular things you didn't want to talk about? Are there particular types of people you avoid? Were you adequately prepared? What things drove you to fear?

3. Pray. If you have sinned, confess, and enjoy forgiveness (1 John 1:9). Ask for God's help in understanding your fear. Pray for boldness and a deep love of the gospel. Pray for opportunities to speak for Jesus and for God's help to take them.

This is not a complex formula. It's a simple appeal. An appeal to not grow weary in doing good, or in wrestling with sin, by justifying fears that inhibit the bold proclamation of the gospel.

ENDNOTE

1 For one example of this logic, see "Anxiety", Beyond Blue, January 2019, www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety

Daniel C. Timmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 26 of [New Studies in Biblical Theology](#). Accordance electronic ed. (Leicester: Apollos, 2011), 69-75.

The following sections are drawn from Timmer's discussion of Jonah 1. Particularly worth reading is the section "Jonah, Yahweh and the Sailors," where Timmer provides an interesting and coherent explanation of Jonah's suggestion that the sailors should throw him overboard in light of the rest of the book.

Identities clarified and remade

Yahweh as creator and judge

After unsuccessfully imploring their gods to save them in 1:5–6, the sailors begin to reckon with what might be called theodicy (the relation of divine justice to human experience, especially suffering) when they conclude, since the storm continues to rage, that there is unresolved sin in the life of someone among them. Theodicy in the ancient Near East routinely saw the sufferer as ignorant of rather than innocent of some offence, and tended to define righteousness as having done all that can be done to account for, or bring an end to, personal suffering (Bricker 2000: 211–212). The sailors, in other words, take for granted that they have unfinished business with their gods as long as their lives are threatened.

Their alarm, already palpable as we see them jettison as much cargo as possible without concern for economic consequences, escalates further when the lot falls to Jonah and he begins to speak. Leaving aside for the moment his self-identification as a Hebrew, the [p. 70] sailors take to heart especially the second element in his statement, which identifies him as guilty before the creator of heaven, earth and sea. The sailors are aghast when they hear that one among them has attempted to flee from a deity who has sovereignty on sea and land, and who as their creator exercises his justice everywhere.³³ Their own gods (to whom they attributed the ability to control primarily just one sphere anyway) had failed to respond, or were unable to aid them, so that not just Jonah's words, but the sailors' present experience, remove all deities except Yahweh from the scene.

The sailors and Jonah thus find themselves face to face with a deity who has unlimited power and has apparently begun to punish some sin among them. It is striking that in those circumstances the sailors are the first ones to react, asking Jonah what they should do to him so that the sea would become calm. Jonah himself does exactly nothing until thus prompted, though he understood more clearly than the sailors his unique responsibility for their common predicament. Why he is so passive is a question we will consider in connection with his claim to fear Yahweh.

Jonah, Yahweh and the sailors

To return to the first element in Jonah's reply to the sailors' questions, his statement that he is a Hebrew distinguishes him ethnically from everyone else on board.³⁴ Since Jonah

identifies himself first ethnically, then religiously, we may infer that his ethnicity is foremost in his self-identity, though it is clearly of no relevance to the sailors.

Jonah's self-description as one who 'fears Yahweh' complicates our task of interpretation, since it jars with his disobedience of the divine commission. As already mentioned, Wolff notes that fearing or revering Yahweh 'describes a living relationship of obedience and trust', but neither of these elements is evident in Jonah's behaviour.³⁵ [p. 71] Jonah is undoubtedly Hebrew, but in the light of his actions the reader has every right to doubt Jonah's second claim: apparently, not every Hebrew fears Yahweh.

The last phrase that Jonah uses to describe Yahweh, the one 'who made the sea and the dry land', suggestively traces all humanity back to the divine act of creation and articulates our fundamental equality before God (cf. Exod. 20:11; Neh. 9:6; Ps. 146:6; Amos 5:8; 9:6) (Lux 1994: 109–111). It thus confirms that while Jonah's ethnicity is what comes first to his mind, other considerations outweigh it: as soon as Jonah opens his mouth, his words begin to establish a contrast between his view of himself as different from the Gentile sailors and God's view of humanity as fundamentally equal before him in the light of their common status as creatures in his image.

This presentation of Jonah as a prophet fundamentally in rebellion against Yahweh, and thus on the same religious plane as the sailors (even though he thinks otherwise), sets the stage for a surprising turn of events in the sailors' lives. This new situation, moreover, allows the narrator to develop further his characterization of both Jonah and the sailors.

While some have argued that Jonah's call for the sailors to throw him overboard indicates his concern for them, this explains at most only part of his behaviour. He certainly does understand that the storm indicates divine displeasure at his own disobedience (1:12b) and that the others were in danger of drowning on account of his sin. So, once prompted to do something, he suggests that the sailors throw him into the waves so as to make the sea 'calm for them' (1:12a). But what led Jonah to assume that his death would assuage the storm? And why, especially in the light of the later emphasis on Nineveh's change, does Jonah completely ignore repentance, which can deliver sinners from seemingly certain punishment?³⁶ Nowhere in this chapter, or anywhere else in Jonah for that matter, are we told that he repented of his disobedience, so his eventual trek to Nineveh should not be taken as irrefutable evidence that he has fully submitted himself to God's call.³⁷

In the light of this conscious avoidance of repentance, we are permitted to explore other possible motives, in particular that his choice to go overboard rather than repent suggests that he would [p. 72] rather die than change course. If this seems presumptive in the light of the meagre data available here in Jonah 1, recall that we will see this same attitude again in Jonah 4, where Jonah's life becomes meaningless to him if his desire to see Gentiles punished is thwarted. Jonah's desire to perish by drowning might also suggest that he sees divine justice as inevitably bringing immediate punishment (in this case, of Jonah himself), a theodicy that he surely applies to Nineveh (but fears that God does not). In any case, Jonah's confession in 4:2–3 that his attitude toward Nineveh has been consistent from the beginning gives us good grounds to doubt that an altruistic motive was uppermost in Jonah's decision to go overboard. It also suggests that Jonah's real motives are not yet visible, so a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' is biblically authorized at this point.

The sailors and Yahweh

While Jonah's willingness to sacrifice his life in order to save the sailors is perhaps laudable, the sailors' efforts to save him from death are certainly so. For one thing, it is telling that while Jonah is willing to involve the sailors in his death, they recoil from the suggestion and with courage and compassion do all they can to avoid throwing him to his death. But the growing storm renders this effort unsuccessful, and with no other option they then pray for Yahweh not to count them guilty for Jonah's death.

This clearly demonstrates their newfound conviction that he really is the universal Judge of whom Jonah had told them. Their prayer, cast in words that echo Psalms 115:3, 135:6, recognizes Yahweh's sovereignty over them and the storm.³⁸ Not only that, but they recognize Yahweh as God before he has shown that he will not hold them guilty for Jonah's death, and before the storm has abated. Because their religious transformation is evident before they derive any demonstrable benefit from it, it cannot be motivated by pragmatism or self-preservation.³⁹ In short, they revere Yahweh for who he is, not for what he can give them.

The links between the sailors' prayer and Psalms 115 and 135 [p. 73] merit further reflection. The former contrasts at length 'the nations' (Ps. 115:1) and those who believe in Yahweh, and sets the impotence of the Gentiles' idols over against Yahweh's sovereignty and power in delivering those who trust in him. Psalm 135, for its part, echoes the description of idols in Psalm 115 but adds references to the sea as subject to Yahweh (135:6) and Jerusalem as the site of his throne (135:21). These elements create an interesting complexity in Yahweh's identity: though he is tied to Israel, his deliverance is available to all who trust in him. The echo of these two psalms in Jonah 1 also has the effect of substituting the now-converted sailors for the Israelites of Psalms 115 and 135, and contrasting pagan deities with the God of Israel.

The characterization of the sailors that has so far focused on their speech is next complemented by a focus on their actions once the storm has ended (in all likelihood the sacrifices were offered after their voyage ended, since the recently lightened ship would no longer carry the wherewithal for a sacrifice). First, their reverence for Yahweh is expressed in precisely the same terms that described their fear of the storm: 'and the men feared YHWH with a great fear' (Jon. 1:16). This can hardly be something less than whole-hearted conversion to Yahweh: as already noted, the phrase 'to fear/revere God' in the OT consistently describes those who have and maintain a healthy relationship with Yahweh.⁴⁰ The sailors' sacrifices and vows in the same verse confirm this, since such actions habitually prove a permanent commitment to a deity.⁴¹ We should not overlook the fact that the description of the sailors' worship in Jonah 1:16 lacks the Zion element apparent in Psalm 107, which began the characterization of the seamen by means of references to other parts of Scripture earlier in the chapter (Ps. 107:32; Jon. 1:4–6, 13).⁴²

Here again the author of Jonah has echoed OT texts that do more than simply illustrate the link between true faith in Yahweh and offering vows and sacrifices. Psalm 50 draws our attention first of all because it is one of a very few texts that speak of 'sacrificing' [p. 74] and 'vows' in the same breath. No less interesting is the stress its author puts on the propriety of vows and sacrifices *provided that* the worshipper's life is in accord with God's revealed will. It is also interesting that Psalm 50 addresses Israelites who have taken the covenant upon their lips but whose hearts disdain God's word (50:17). Likewise Isaiah 19:21, which shares several terms with Jonah 1:16, describes the eschatological restoration of Egypt (Isa. 19:16–25) and shows Israel's ancient enemies fulfilling the normal Israelite cultic duties of vows and sacrifices (Oswalt 2003: 243).

These intertextual links to other passages in the OT show that the author of Jonah is a careful interpreter of existing Scripture. The first link, to Psalm 107, shows that Yahweh can deliver anyone, anywhere, and the links to Psalms 115 and 135 contrast 'the nations' with those who 'fear Yahweh', tying such belief to Jerusalem (135:2, 21) but applying the language of 'fearing Yahweh' to the Gentile sailors! The last intertextual connection in chapter 1 is to a variety of texts that describe true devotion to Israel's God in terms of his worshippers' cultic actions of vowing vows and offering sacrifices, passages that either see some ethnic Hebrews as unqualified to offer acceptable sacrifices (Ps. 50) or foresee the eschatological participation of Gentiles in Israel's cult (Isa. 19:21).⁴³

This wealth of identifying information, in addition to establishing a glaring contrast between Jonah and the sailors, completes the rapid transformation of the sailors' religious identity (Lux 1994: 121). This is, moreover, the clearest instance of such a change in the book of Jonah, and it occurred with sailors whose prior identity was a blank in everything but religion—and in that domain, they were as far from Yahwism as could be! The description of their conversion in language drawn from elsewhere in the OT, material that in its original context applied to faithful Israelites, adds potency to the description of their entry into the number of those who revere Yahweh.

The aftermath of the storm

Even though Israel was almost constantly threatened by Assyria, and would fall to its armies barely thirty years after the end of [p. 75] Jeroboam's reign, the book of Jonah views Israel and Assyria through the largest possible lens, that of humanity under the threat of divine judgment but presented with the possibility of repentance. In doing so it pushes to the side the imperialist motives of Jeroboam II and Assyria alike and reasserts Yahweh's universal kingship and grace, paradoxically pointing to the only way of escape for both Israel and Nineveh (Timmer 2008a: 22).

In more concrete terms, Jonah's anti-missionary activity has ironically resulted in the conversion of non-Israelites, preparing the reader for the shocking contrast between Jonah and God that comes fully into view in chapter 4. While we never hear of these sailors again, their contribution to the story's development is substantial. As for the fate of Jonah, presently under the waves if the Hebrew chapter division is followed (Eng. 1:17 is Heb. 2:1), one must read on.