

Paradox. According to the dictionary a *paradox* is a belief that is contrary to received opinion or it's a person, condition or act with seemingly contradictory qualities or phases.

Right after I graduated from college, I secured a job to help finish paying off school bills. I had worked my way through college doing roofing, so I applied for a job at a local roofing company. It was Detroit in the early eighties. Jobs were very scarce because the country was in a deep Recession. (When the country is in a Recession, Detroit is in a Depression.)

One place interviewed me and the owner, Paul, decided to hire me but not to work on the roofs but as a salesman. It was one of the roughest places that I have ever worked. Paul had basically stumbled into this business. He was a biker who had even done some time. Most of the employees were either bikers or worse. At 5:00 they'd lock the doors, have some brews or smoke some weed. Paul cheated on his wife and even had a girlfriend who would hang out at the office. So here I was the recent Bible college grad/preacher in the midst of all this. Jane and I were married about a year after I got hired there and they all came to the wedding. It was a little like having a mafia invasion. During the time that I worked there, the company attorney was murdered by another biker. One job that I sold ended up being next to a chop shop so Paul had them bring his sawed off shotgun to the job site to use if needed. Paul cheated on his wife, cheated his customers. He could lie like a dog but he never cheated his employees. If anything, he was too generous with those who worked for him. After I quit and took a position as an Assistant Pastor in Central Illinois, they gave me a big send-off. And the following Spring I got a call. I had been working on this huge project just before I left. It was over a \$100,000 job. The owner signed the contract and even though I no longer worked there, though he owed me nothing, Paul sent me the entire commission – over \$5000. Now that's a paradox...a pagan doing something righteous.

Some years later, I was between churches and went back to roofing. This time I took a similar job with much more responsibility but this time with a professing Christian. I launched a new division and set up a whole new branch office for this man. God blessed and I broke all of the sales records. This man was a leader in his church, taught a Sunday School class, was even a big donor for several national ministries. And because he was a professing Christian, I did something very foolish. I worked for him with only a verbal agreement...and he ripped me off. He cheated me out of my commission some \$30 to \$35 thousand, which was really big bucks in the mid-eighties. And sadly, he ripped off nearly every other employee most of whom too were believers. That too is a paradox. Here was a professing believer who acted like a pagan. Remember a paradox is a person with contradictory qualities. Today we're in our second study in Jonah. It's act II. And it's **Embarrassing Paradoxes**. Turn again to Jonah 1:1-9 (p. 654). **This morning we'll be looking at three Embarrassing Episodes.**

1. It's embarrassing when God has to intervene to get our attention. Most of us have had one of those "life's most embarrassing moments." I know that I've had more than my share. School seemed to be my arena of choice. I remember being horrified

when my 1st Grade teacher made me go stand in the corner or when my 5th grade teacher wanted to see me after class. Even in college, I discovered that it was not a good thing when the Dean of Students wanted to see you ASAP. Most of us have been there. We've had someone in authority correct us publicly. We know what it is to have our face turn red, get a pit in our stomach, or have our mouth go dry.

Verse 4 records for us, *"Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up."* Notice the contrast between verses 3 and 4, *"but Jonah ran away... Then the Lord sent."* It reminds me of Francis Thompson's powerful poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, where he beautifully writes of God pursuing him like a hunting dog on a trail. Or as African-American poet, James Weldon Johnson, in his poem, *The Prodigal Son* renders it, *"Young man, young man... your arm's are too short to box with God."* C.S. Lewis said that God whispers to us in health and prosperity. Being hard of hearing, we fail to notice God's voice in both. So God turns up the amplifier by means of suffering. Then, His voice booms through the living room. But we may be so deaf spiritually that we still don't hear anything. Like Jonah, we still don't wake up but keep right on sleeping. But in His faithfulness, God begins to shout louder and louder in the storm until we finally wake up with a jolt.

This was no ordinary storm. The key word here is *"great."* It's a severe storm. A storm so bad that even seasoned sailors believe that they are going to perish. The word *"sent"* means *"hurl"* or *"cast."* It indicates extreme power and force. God literally hurled a great storm at Jonah's ship.

What a wonderful example too of the attributes of God. Jonah was running from God but God knew exactly where he was. That's God's **omniscience** – God knows everything. Have you ever thought about this? God can't learn. He can't because He already has all knowledge. Then, there's God's **omnipresence**. There is no place that you or I can go where God is not. The prophet Amos acknowledges this, *"Though they dig down to the depths of the grave, from there my hand will take them. Though they climb up to the heavens, from there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, there I will hunt them down and seize them"* (9:2-3).

Just one more big word – God's **omnipotence**. God is all-powerful. He controls everything, even the wind and the waves. He's in total control of nature. How wonderful that we have a Heavenly Father Who knows everything, Who is always with us and can do anything. What a comfort that is! But how frightening when you're pulling a Jonah! No one ever gets away with anything. Do you a rotten attitude? God knows it. Are you harboring bitterness? God knows it. Do you have a secret sin? God knows it. And because He is omnipotent, He can do something about it.

Hebrews 12 says, *"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves."* Jonah may have been through with God but God wasn't through with Jonah. It's never ceased to amaze me how a parent will continually love a wayward child. They persevere...they never give up hope. If a human parent does that, should it really surprise us that our Heavenly Father does the same thing? Can you see the mountainous waves? Can you hear the wind thrashing that little boat? Can you hear the timbers of the boat creaking like they are going to come all apart? When God intervenes, He really intervenes. You cannot run or hide from God.

2. It's embarrassing when pagans are more spiritually sensitive than believers. Verse 5 *"All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship."* This storm sure got the attention of the sailors. It scared them to death.

When will we realize that we don't sin in isolation? Over the years I've heard folk rationalize their sin by saying, "I'm not hurting anyone else." A spouse rationalizes an affair. An employee rationalizes stealing. A young person rationalizes substance abuse or pre-marital sex.

Jonah is a powerful illustration of the ripple effect of sin. Like second-hand smoke, our disobedience harms the people around us. The tragedy of a backslidden Christian is that they make those around them miserable.

Friend, if you're living in a miserable situation, do a soul search? Maybe it's you? Maybe you're the carrier. Most of us are great at blame shifting but too often instead of looking around, we need to just look in the mirror.

This is also a powerful example of the foolishness of that common slogan in American religiosity, "Prayer changes things." These sailors prayed and nothing changed. I'm sure that they prayed very sincerely. For prayer to change things it has to be to the right Person by the right person.

What a violent storm this must have been! For seasoned sailors who had seen so many storms to be so frightened, it must have been a terrible storm.

They even threw the cargo overboard. This was their source of income. This was the main reason for the voyage but to spare their own lives, they threw it overboard.

Jonah's sin now cost them financially. And they were doing everything that they could possibly do – they prayed and worked.

What a parallel to our lost world! When Hurricane Katrina hit we heard a lot about prayer and people worked as much as they could. But man in and of himself is insufficient to solve life's real problems. The trouble with today's governmental leaders is not that they are incompetent. It's just that the problems are way too big for them.

Now I'm not suggesting that Government does not have some responsibility. But Government is not our ultimate hope. They do not have the solution. The best that Government can do is shoot off a prayer and throw the cargo overboard.

Most political speeches have three parts. First, how bad it is. Then, if the person is running for office, how they can solve the problems. Finally, there is a brief appeal to God for help...that last part is only a few seconds. Just like those sailors, man keeps rowing and throwing but the storm just keeps right on blowing. But at least these pagans work and pray. At least they're living in the light that they have. At least they're doing the best that they can. Isn't it interesting too? When people are desperate, even the most godless unbeliever, they nearly always pray. All except for the prophet...

3. It's embarrassing when believers are spiritually asleep. *"But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, 'How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe He will take notice of us, and we will not perish'" (vss. 5b-6).*

Have you ever been caught with your hand in the cookie jar? Have you ever been caught doing something that you knew was wrong and then it became pretty obvious to

a lot of people? Sometimes we can go a long time without being caught. But, at the same time, we also know that those things we have done or said that we wish would stay hidden, have a way of sneaking out after a little time has passed.

Recently, I read that there's a new T-shirt out about the IRS: "*We've got what it takes to take what you've got.*" Now I don't know about the IRS, but I do know about God.

Without question God has what it takes to take what we've got. God can always get our attention...and that's exactly what He does with Jonah.

A) When the chips are down even the world prays. A severe storm hits but Jonah is asleep. Seasoned sailors are terrified but Jonah is asleep. Huge waves are crashing over the boat but Jonah is asleep. The cargo is dumped overboard but Jonah is asleep. An Ecumenical Prayer Meeting is held but Jonah is asleep. When we are in a deep sleep, we do not like the sound of the alarm clock. Our son, Aaron, is a sound sleeper. While the whole house can hear his alarm and I'm getting concerned the neighbors are going to call and complain, Aaron can keep on sleeping. While I can imagine sleeping through an alarm clock, can you imagine sleeping through a violent storm that is so vicious seasoned sailors are terrified?

Most of us hate the alarm clock. We want to remain comfortable deep, down beneath the covers. Have you ever used the snooze button on your alarm clock? The snooze button permits us to sleep a little longer. Many people live their lives with the snooze button engaged. They would rather sleep longer than discern the problems of their personal lives, families, business, and nation. For many years God has been sounding the alarm and people have been pushing the snooze button and going back to sleep. If we do not wake up and stay up we are going to lose our culture permanently.

In the midst of the raging storm God was shouting, "Wake up Jonah! Wake up Jonah!" Yet, Jonah did not hear the storm or the voice of God. He was sound asleep, unaware of the dangers around him. It's a paradox. Pagan, godless sailors were more spiritually sensitive and more aware of their impending doom than the prophet Jonah.

The Captain's words "*Get up!*" are the same words in the Hebrew that God used, "*Go to the great city of Nineveh*" (v. 2). Jonah must have thought that he was having a nightmare. And the words are the same words that God would use with Jonah – "Stop going down Jonah!! Get up!!"

Do you really think that Jonah prayed at this point? The Captain asked him to but I don't think that he did. There's no record that he did. Isn't it sad that the only one, who should have been praying, apparently didn't?

Wise are the words of John Hutton who insightfully writes, "*A man does not pray who is in a state of sin. Such a man cannot pray. He must first repent. At that moment Jonah was the only heathen man on board. Compared with Jonah at that moment, those heathen were believers.*"

I wonder how many times we in the Church are asleep when the world is awake. *World Magazine* had a recent editorial on what a phenomenal opportunity the Church has to reach out to the lost and be a witness after Hurricane Katrina. Since the Church's beginning over and over again crises have allowed us to be lights in the darkness. But too often Christians are asleep. When slavery was part of the culture, most Christians were asleep. During the horrible abuses before the Civil Rights Movement, much of the Church was asleep. During our current abortion epidemic and Gay Rights movement, the Church has been snoring. Basically, we slumbered through

9/11 and let the government respond. When the storms are crashing, the Church needs to be out in the lifeboats because storms are always opportunities for believers to speak for the Prince of Peace. General Douglas MacArthur was right; *"There are no atheists in foxholes."* In a storm even the most pagan pagan is open for true answers.

Do we even notice when those around us are going through storms? Is a co-worker having marital problems? Has someone around us lost a loved one? Does a spouse or parent have cancer? Do you have a new neighbor who is adjusting to change? Is a friend going through a crisis? If we would wake up, most of us would notice scores of people around us going through terrible storms. When the lost are awake and asking questions, are we paying attention? Or, are we sound asleep just like Jonah, totally out of touch with the needs and opportunities around us? When a lost friend asks us to pray for them, do we?

And what an act of mercy this was from God. God did not have to send a storm to wake Jonah up. He certainly did not need Jonah. He could have just let him sleep all the way to Tarshish or had the storm result in Jonah's demise. God had other prophets who would have been much more willing.

B) When the chips are down the world looks to chance. *"Then the sailors said to each other, 'Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.' They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah" (v. 7).* God cast the storm at this tiny boat and now He controls the cast. Someone said that a coincidence is a miracle for which God chooses to remain anonymous. God's hand is here. He causes Jonah to get the short straw and when the spotlight falls on him, these pagan sailors pepper him with questions: *"So they asked him, 'Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?'" (v. 8).*

The dice were cast but God determined the outcome. Donald Grey Barnhouse paraphrased this verse by saying, *"man throws the dice but it is God who makes the spots come up."* Numbers 32:33 states, *"you may be sure that your sin will find you out."* God made sure that Jonah was the man.

Note: So should we still cast lots? Is this a viable way to discern God's will today? We find lots cast on several occasions in Scripture, even in the early church. The book of Proverbs says, *"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (16:33)* or *"Casting the lot settles disputes and keeps strong opponents apart" (18:18).* But God does not want us to live by chance or luck. Back then, they did not have a complete revelation. Today we have Scripture, God's complete revelation to guide us. We have the Holy Spirit indwelling us Who will guide us in determining God's will. So for a believer to depend on chance to determine God's will is both presumptuous and foolish.

C) When the chips are down, a down believer may have the right confession but usually has a poor profession. *"Jonah answered, 'I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land'" (v. 9)* Someone wisely said, *"Do you want to hear God laugh...tell Him your plans."* Verse 9 shows the sense of humor of God. Why was Jonah on this ship? He refused to preach to pagans. So what does Jonah end up doing? Preaching to pagans with a boat as a pulpit. It's possible that there were even some Ninevehites among the sailors. And don't you think that Jonah was embarrassed when he had to fess up?

But what a powerful statement of who God is: “*the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.*” What a bozo thing for Jonah to do!! Since Jonah knows that God made the sea...why does he foolishly take a boat to escape God? Jonah played chess with God and he lost.

And this is orthodoxy. Jonah was a Fundamentalist. He has the right confession. He knows the right words. The problem with Jonah was not his *belief* but his *behavior*. His was not a problem of *orthodoxy* but *orthopraxy*. He claims that he “*worships,*” which would be better translated “*reveres*” God. But if Jonah truly “*revered*” God, why is he on this boat running from God’s command?

Someone once asked Ghandi what was the greatest problem with Christianity. He simply replied, “Christians.” I wonder how many times you and I, like Jonah, are a turn-off. We know the right words. We have the right belief but our behavior speaks so loud that a lost world can’t hear what we’re saying. I wonder how many times we confuse the lost. They know we’re professing believers but they can’t put our behavior together with what we say that we believe. Jonah didn’t walk the talk and too often neither do we!

But even as a failure of a prophet, Jonah still points these pagan sailors to the one true God. Now that’s grace. And even when we are not what or who we should be, God in His grace still often uses us. We truly serve a gracious God!

Conclusion: The Church does not need more Jonahs. How embarrassing it is when God has to intervene to wake us up or when pagans are more spiritually sensitive than we are. It’s so embarrassing when a lost world has to wake us up. I wonder if God is going to have to send a storm to wake up the Church today. Will it take a storm to wake up the Church in America? Will it take a storm to wake us up at Grace? Will it take a storm to wake you up?

The sailors asked Jonah, “*What have you done?*” Too often the lost are asking us the same thing.

I recently read something that really shook me up. It really got my attention. Did you know that Chinese Christians are praying for us? Chinese believers who are suffering horrible persecution that is beyond even the imagination of most of us are praying for us...even this morning.

A reporter from the Baptist Mission Board asked a Chinese believer how American Christians should pray for their Chinese brothers and sisters. And this Chinese believer said, “*Stop praying for persecution in China to end. It is through persecution that the church has grown.*” Then this leader in the Chinese Church added, “*We, in fact, are praying that American church might taste the same persecution so revival would come to the American church like we have seen in China.*”

We in the American Church keep praying for God to bless us with success, prosperity, political clout, etc. but persecuted believers in other countries are praying that God will allow us to experience persecution so that we’ll act like the blessing God made us to be.

Is it going to take a storm to wake us up? Are we Jonahs? Will it take persecution or suffering? Christian friend, is God trying to get your attention? Do you need to wake up?