

Famous NBA coach, Pat Riley, said *“Look for your choices, pick the best one, then go with it.”*

Each of us faces choices every day. Some life-changing...some good, some bad. For instance, I doubt that any of you have ever heard of Sam Philips. Sam Philips is the guy who sold a small recording company to RCA in 1955 for just \$35,000. His company that he sold included an exclusive contract with a young man named Elvis Presley.

Unknowingly, Sam Philips forfeited millions of dollars in royalties. Did you know that Tom Selleck turned down the lead role for Indiana Jones? You don't know the name of the girl who told Bill Gates, “Bill, choose...it's the computer or me.” And this one is free, Husbands, never pause even for a moment when your wife asks, “Do I look fat in this?” That's the wrong choice!!

But what if you're in a situation where there are no good choices? What if you are in a rock and hard place dilemma? Most social studies students have heard of the lifeboat situation where you cannot save everyone but are supposed to make a choice about who to save and who to let die.

The sailors in Jonah 1 faced **Impossible Choices**. Turn again to Jonah 1:10-15 (p. 654). Today we're in our third message from the book of Jonah. Jonah, God's prophet, is running from God and His command. He's supposed to go and preach at Nineveh but instead he heads to Tarshish, the furthest known place back them from Nineveh. God sends a huge storm to rock his boat. The sailors do everything that they can to survive the storm but Jonah is below deck snoring away. They wake him up, cast lots and find out that he's the reason God is breathing down their necks. God has literally hurled the mother of all storms at them. And they don't know what to do. They are faced with **Impossible Choices**. They're caught between God and His prophet. They did not want to be in the circumstances that they were in. They did not want to make the choices that they were being asked to make. But they didn't want to die either.

This morning we want to examine the two choices that these pagan sailors were being asked to make and why they were so reluctant to make either choice. And finally, we'll see God providentially work through the situation that He has placed them in.

Choice #1: They were very reluctant to harm Jonah. Even today with OSHA and all of our safety guidelines, commercial fishermen have the most dangerous profession. Being a sailor in the ancient world was a very tough job. It took a certain kind of man. Personally, I find it amazing that they even struggled with a choice. These were not U.S. Navy sailors or Coast Guard types. These were crusty, crude old salts of the sea. Picture Long John Silver or Johnny Depp's recent flick, *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Something amazing is taking place here. Something is happening to these godless, hardened sailors. Instead of grabbing Jonah and hurling him overboard, “Good riddance shark-bait,” they tried to save him. This is a wow moment! What's going on here? Why would they try to save a man who brought God's judgment upon them? Here they were, pagans, trying to save a man who wanted nothing to do with pagans. They risk their lives so that a man who didn't deserve it and is about to cost them their lives, doesn't die. Why?

a) Because Jonah was a prophet of God. While Jonah may have been the prophet

on the run, he was still God's prophet. These sailors knew full well what God could do. They didn't want to burn their fingers on the omnipotence of this God of Jonah's. No doubt as sailors they had heard the stories of what Jonah's God could do: part the Red Sea, knock down the walls of Jericho, take on Pharaoh. If Jonah had been one of their own, he'd been over the side as fast as they could pitch him. But he wasn't.

Remember when David had a chance to kill King Saul who was trying to take his life. David told his men, "*The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master (King Saul), the Lord's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD*" (1 Sam. 24:6).

Like most believers, I was embarrassed recently by Pat Robertson's remarks about Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. While I disagree with Pat Robertson and believe that a believer, particularly a preacher should not suggest the death of anyone – Pat Robertson is still a servant of God. He's ordained by God. And it's a serious thing to ridicule or harm someone whom God has chosen. These sailors were wise to proceed cautiously.

b) Because they had respect for Jonah. A couple of years ago I was driving along Highway 100, just North of Southridge. In my rearview mirror I noticed that the lady behind me wasn't paying attention to the road but was yelling at her kids in the backseat. It was heavy traffic and sure enough, moments later she rear-ended me. It was just a minor fender bender but we had to call the police to at least file a report. Wouldn't it have been pretty silly if I had gotten out of the car and asked her to give me advice on how to drive in heavy traffic? She'd caused our incident, so why would I ask her for advice? Yet that's pretty much what these sailors did. Jonah was the cause of this terrible storm but they ask Jonah, "*What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?*" They rightly figured that since Jonah's God was behind the storm, God's servant would know best how to handle the storm.

Jonah now starts to wake up to God's working. Jonah says, "*Pick me up and throw me into the sea and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you*" (v. 12). God hurled a storm at this tiny ship so Jonah suggests a further hurling...of himself. He's beginning to wake up and come out of his spiritual lethargy. At least now he's concerned about the lives of pagans. But he's still not ready to repent. He'd rather die than preach at Nineveh so he doesn't suggest that they pray, let him confess his sin and turn the ship around to head to Nineveh. He also will not take his own life. Suicide was a great evil in Jewish culture. He doesn't jump overboard to end his own life. But to save these sailors, he's willing to let them "execute" him by throwing him overboard.

c) The sailors try even harder. "*Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before*" (v. 13). Literally, they tried to dig into the waves to dig their way back to land but the sea grows wilder. The Hebrew says that the sea "*raged*." The storm picks up and gets worse. Jonah had given them an out but they still try to save his hide.

Jonah put their lives at risk when he booked passage on their ship yet they care about his life. This was a shock for the original readers. Jewish readers were shocked that pagan sailors acted more honorably and righteously than God's prophet. We would have understood if they had said, "Well, if you really think that's what we should do...so long Jonah!" But they didn't. Their noble efforts demonstrate too how futile it is to try to

fight against God. God had a purpose in the raging storm and until His will was done, the storm would keep on raging.

We learn something else that's very important from this story. *God has a purpose in any continuing storm.* None of us likes stormy weather. None of us enjoys rocking on the waves. We're afraid of being dashed against the rocks. Do you know what it is to be in turmoil? In indecision? Not knowing which way to turn? Do you wonder, "Why does God let this last?" Are you in a particular situation right now that is terribly miserable and completely unexplainable? Maybe you're in a storm that's beyond you and you wonder why God doesn't come to your rescue. "Surely God can handle this matter?" you keep saying. You're perplexed...hurting. You're questioning, "Why doesn't God work it out now, right now?" A vital lesson from this story is that God always has a purpose in the continuing storm. It may be rough, it may be dark, it may be gloomy. You may not know which way to turn. The solution may be beyond you. But my friend, trust God because your Heavenly Father has a purpose in the continuing storm. These sailors were caught in the cross hairs of God's purpose.

Choice #2: They were afraid to face Jonah's God. While the sailors were terrified of the storm, there is not a word adequate enough to describe their fear of Jonah's God. Having made their best efforts to save Jonah, the sailors conclude that Jonah's final solution is their only option. But before casting him into the sea, the sailors pray again. Verse 14 *"Then they cried to the LORD, 'O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased.'"* They were pointing out that God had sent the storm. God caused the lot to fall on Jonah. Jonah himself admitted that he was the man and that they should cast him overboard. Though they don't like the choices and tried to do everything to avoid this outcome, they were more afraid of Jonah's God than the storm or even harming Jonah. They only do this because they are terrified of God. They were much more afraid of the Creator than the creature. Verse 3 contrasts that while they were "*afraid*" of the storm, they are "*terrified*" of Jonah's God (verse 10).

You see, while Jonah wasn't concerned about pagans, God was. While this storm was sent primarily to wake up Jonah, it was also sent to wake up these pagan sailors to their own spiritual needs. God knows that we are so asleep spiritually that it often takes a storm to wake us up. In crisis, we are more attentive to the voice of a loving God than any other time. Many of you are here this morning because God brought a crisis in your life to wake you up so that you would turn to Him. The sailors were not looking for God. They were just doing their work, out on another voyage but God used one backslidden prophet and one huge storm to wake them up.

God frequently has to bring us to a point of helplessness before we turn to Him so that He can save us. Someone wisely said, *"If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist; If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior."*

These pagan sailors are an excellent example of someone coming to Christ. They first acknowledge their own helplessness. They hear Jonah's witness of God's truth, act on it, and worship the true God. They hear and have faith in Jonah's witness about God.

Though like Jonah, they attempt to first run from the difficult action required of them (throwing Jonah overboard) but they realize the futility of rowing against God's ordained storm, so they surrender, believing a seemingly impossible word from God, that God's appointed man will die for their salvation. And in the end they believe and worship God.

Final Result: Pagan sailors become people of saving faith. You know what most impresses me about these pagan sailors – they pray – after the storm is over. This is not a foxhole prayer. As soon as Jonah hits the water, that storm died like the waves in a wave pool at a water park when someone hits the off switch. Instant, complete calm. Jonah wouldn't go to Nineveh to preach to pagans so God had him preach to pagans in the middle of a storm...and they repent and turn to God.

You see, nearly everyone prays during the storm. Some pray before the storm but only true believers pray and praise after the storm...post-storm. Verse 16 *"At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to Him."*

Someday we will see these sailors again in heaven. This is their salvation experience. They didn't just get saved from the storm; they got saved from their sins. There is action accompanying their faith. True faith always has a behavior that accompanies it.

Previously, they were calling out to their gods...any god who might save them. Now they pray to the one true God. So let me suggest **three evidences** of the conversion of these once pagan sailors.

a) They greatly feared the Lord. Initially you may think that just because someone is afraid of God that doesn't make them a believer. But this isn't how the word *fear* is used in this verse. In fact, it's the exact word that Jonah used of himself back in verse 9 when he said, *"I am a Hebrew and I worship (or fear) the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made the sea and the land."* This *fear* speaks of a reverential awe and respect that the believer possesses when he comes into relationship with the Lord. Although we may often ignore this reverence that the Lord God so deserves, it is still built within our new spiritual nature. Believers have this healthy reverence, respect and awe towards the Lord. It's a sign that we belong to Him.

This is the third time that we find the sailors fearful. The first was when the storm caused them to fear death. The second is right after Jonah told them who he was and how he served the one true God. They were terrified because they had previously heard of the awesome power of this God. While the storm was brewing and these sailors thought their life was over, I could understand if they feared God. That would only be natural. The second time they were fearful indicates that they not only had a cognitive knowledge of this God but they also believed the things they had heard about Him. Yet now that the Lord has calmed the sea and spared their lives their reaction of fear is a sign of worship and reverence towards the Almighty God who is interacting with them. There has been a spiritual progression in their understanding of the fear of the Lord. They moved from superstition, to belief, and finally to a reverential fear or reverence to the Lord. Now, in reverential fear they choose to worship God.

b) They offer a sacrifice to the Lord. The second evidence of belief is that they saw their need for atonement. They needed a substitute, just as Jesus is our substitute for our sins and guilt on the Cross. What's noteworthy is that this sacrifice came after the storm ceased.

c) They made vows or promises to the Lord. Don't miss the order. They made vows after making the sacrifice. This is not salvation but what we in the Church call *sanctification*. In simple terms it's our way of saying "thank you." The mariners didn't make vows to gain God's mercy. None of us can do anything to gain God's mercy. His mercy is a free gift given to us on the Cross. We give ourselves and of ourselves in praise and gratitude because of His great grace and salvation that we already possess. And this is the great irony of this story. Jonah was running from God because he did not want God to save the heathen in Nineveh. But the first great event in the story was the conversion of the heathen sailors, who were in many respects just like the pagans of Nineveh. And Jonah was not even there to see it.

One more thing – let the faith of these sailors serve as a lesson to us that hypocrisy and disobedience is no excuse for unbelief. Jonah was a hypocrite. He was running from God. He was a poor testimony for God. Yet Jonah's spiritual failure did not keep these sailors from trusting in God and obeying His Word. Jonah's failure to obey God and submit to Him did not keep these pagan sailors from doing so.

My friend, do not attempt to excuse your disobedience to God by pointing to the disobedience or hypocrisy of one of God's children. Each of us is personally accountable to God to do what He has commanded us to do.

Conclusion: These sailors felt that they had an impossible choice. You and I do not. We are not caught between God and His prophet. Our choices are usually much easier. God does not usually bring us to such a predicament but He does bring us to the place of decision.

And as Edwin Markham insightfully said, "*Choices are the hinges of destiny*." My friend, your choice about accepting or rejecting Christ will determine your eternal destiny. Those sailors woke up during a storm and turned to the one true God. Friend, do you know the one true God? Have you committed your life to Christ? Perhaps God has brought a storm in your life because He loves you and wants you to turn to Him. Maybe no one else knows what's brewing in your soul but you do. God is speaking to you...even in the storm. Will you listen? Will you turn to Him? Will you turn to Him today?