

*It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.*

**Weekly Edition – July 1, 2016**

Jonah – Chapter 1 – part 8

**Jonah Flees From the Lord**

*7 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.*

**Three Reflections on Today's Text**

**First Consideration: The Casting of Lots**

- 1) In the ancient world there were many ways of casting lots. Although we cannot be certain, the lots used by these sailors were probably some sort of marked stone that could be tossed or thrown like dice in order to indicate who is chosen and who is not. It is analogous to tossing a coin and calling heads or tails. Cast repeatedly, lots could be used to pick one person out of a whole group through a gradual process of elimination.
- 2) Although little is known today about what lots look like in ancient times, the practice of casting lots is mentioned 70 times in the Old Testament and 7 times in the New Testament.
- 3) The practice of casting lots was used in connection with the division of the promised land between the families of Israel (Joshua chapters 14-21), and also to determine God's will for a given situation. (Joshua 18:6-10; 1 Chronicles 24:5,31) Various offices and functions in the temple were also determined by lot. (1 Chronicles 24:5, 31; 25:8-9; 26:13-14, Luke 1:9) The eleven apostles cast lots to determine who would replace Judas. (Acts 1:26) Casting lots eventually became a game people played and made wagers on. This is seen in the Roman soldiers casting lots for Jesus' garments. (Matthew 27:35)
- 4) In the ancient world, before the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon believers, ancient cultures considered what looks to be a game of chance to be a form of divination – understanding the outcome to be under divine control. We can see from both the Old and New Testaments that God permitted this method of revealing His will in a given situation.
- 5) For the sailors, this is a smart move. At wit's end, they can do no better than try something that will take the next move out of their own hands and place it in the hands of some unknown "god" who might deal mercifully with them.
- 6) Given the number of sailors, and the gradual process of elimination required in repeatedly casting the lots, the sailors yield precious time in the midst of this fierce storm to find out the person who is responsible for this calamity that has come upon them. They put themselves at the disposal of this unknown god by using the most religiously neutral and therefore, also least idolatrous form of divination possible – one that unknown to them, is also used by those who have been called by the Living God to be His own chosen people.

**Application:** If it were only that easy! How convenient it would be to toss a coin or dice to understand God's will in this matter or that. Yet the casting of lots is external, impersonal, outside of relationship, and our God is a God of relationship – a God of love. How do I seek to understand God's will in my life?

**Jonah**

*One of the Twelve Prophets*

1. The Word of the Lord
2. Jonah's mission
3. Jonah flees
4. The storm
5. The great fish
6. Three days in the belly
7. Jonah delivered
8. Nineveh repents
9. Jonah pouts
10. The gourd
11. God's mercy

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### Consideration Two: The Scapegoat

- 1) Unbeknownst to the sailors, Jonah is being set up by the Living God as the fall guy – the scapegoat. These Gentile sailors would be unfamiliar with the term or the concept, but the Jewish reader of Jonah would see the connections right away.
- 2) In Leviticus God requires that lots be used to choose the scapegoat on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. The priest “*is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. <sup>8</sup> He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. <sup>9</sup> Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. <sup>10</sup> But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.*” (Leviticus 16:7-10)
- 3) Choosing the scapegoat is a striking example of divine election, which is to say, God’s way of choosing. At first, there is nothing to distinguish between the two goats, both of which must be pure and unblemished in order to be presented to the Lord at the beginning of the rite. But after the lots are cast, one becomes a holy sacrifice well-pleasing to the Lord, while the other becomes unclean, unfit for the temple or the presence of the Lord.
- 4) The scapegoat was the goat that was *not* sacrificed, not offered to the Lord, because it was unclean, meaning that God imputed to this goat by means of casting of lots, the sin of Israel. To be chosen as the scapegoat is to be rejected as unworthy of God, an abomination rather than an offering. Hence, the scapegoat is not sacrificed, but simply thrown away – like Jonah is about to be thrown into the sea – sent out into the barren wilderness places – cast away from the community.
- 5) Yom Kippur was the holiest day of the year in Israel, the one day when the high priest could enter the “Holy of Holies” and offer sacrifice for the sins of the people. The day itself marks the climax of a ten-day period of repentance.
- 6) Jesus is our High Priest (Hebrews 3:1), whose blood paid the price of our redemption. (Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22) It is once more all the more striking that Jesus chooses to identify Himself with the hapless prophet Jonah. It is the very logic of redemption: the vocation of the chosen people Israel is to be rejected (as we see in Jonah) and thrown out from the presence of the Lord like a scapegoat (that is- tossed overboard into the wilderness of the sea), yet, amazingly, not as a curse, but rather as a blessing that sweeps all Gentiles (in this case, the sailors) under the blanket of divine grace. This is Good News even for those who are not chosen (the sailors here, us Gentiles in a broader sense), because the elect (Jonah here, Israel in a broader sense) are chosen for the blessing of others!!
- 7) Ah, the mystery of grace! *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! <sup>34</sup> “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?” <sup>35</sup> “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?” <sup>36</sup> For from Him and through Him and for Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.* (Romans 11:33-35)
- 8) Jesus Christ becomes both Sacrificial Lamb and Scapegoat for us and for Israel!
- 9) For now, the lots tell the sailors that Jonah is the guilty one – the “scapegoat” – but they are soon to realize that Jonah is also the Lord’s chosen one. It is both a conundrum and paradox. It will cause the sailors great fear – magnifying their present fear and sending it to extreme depths, but will also be for their salvation!

**Application:** The short story of Jonah, which we often subconsciously place alongside other children’s tales, contains within it the mystery of the grace of God profoundly spoken – simply spoken, in ways that even a small child might understand. Have I become too sophisticated, too adult in my reasoning, that I miss the grace of God poured out in these few short chapters? Do I miss the grace of God poured out in the chapters of my own life? Do I truly, deeply, and irrevocably accept that Jesus Christ paid the full, complete and unconditional price for my sin?

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### Third Consideration: The Apparent Arbitrariness of God's Choices

- 1) It is one of the mysteries of faith, and by definition mystery means "something that is kept secret or remains unexplained or unknown" – and our rational minds hate mysteries – at least one's that we cannot solve by means of reason or application of logic! God's choices often appear arbitrary, even random. They appear to lack design or purpose – at least design and purpose that we can comprehend.
- 2) It makes no sense to us that by casting of lots one otherwise perfect and unblemished goat becomes a scapegoat to bear the sin of the people, while the other is holy unto the Lord. Why choose Jacob rather than Esau, when both are still in the womb and neither has done anything good or evil to make a moral difference between them? (Romans 9:11-12) Why choose Israel (i.e., Jacob) out of all nations, when she is no greater or better than the rest of the human race, all made in God's image and likeness?
- 3) It seems as arbitrary as taking a lump of perfectly homogenous clay and using one part of it to make a sacred vessel for use in the temple, and taking another part of it and making a chamber pot into which common garbage is tossed. (see Romans 9:21) It strikes us as unfair. It seems arbitrary, even capricious.
- 4) Yet to get past the impression that God is arbitrary in His choices, or unfair in His dealings with us, we have to notice the reversals in the logic of redemption. First and foremost, the Chosen One, our Lord, Jesus Christ, becomes unclean – the true scapegoat – so that the rest of us may be made clean, made to be an acceptable offering to the Lord. This is not a sudden change in the divine plan, but the fulfillment of it.
- 5) In the same way, Jonah is about to be tossed overboard and thrown away so that a ship load of Gentiles might not perish. What appears as arbitrary to us is actually the divine election of God – the election of grace. (Romans 11:5)
- 6) None of this explains away the deep mystery of election – of grace – it remains something unexplained or unknown to us. Why Jacob and not Esau? Why Israel and not some other nation? Why is one man, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God?
- 7) We have no explanation for these choices, and Holy Scripture does not reveal the logic behind the mind of God. Yet we can appreciate that these choices are glorious, and perhaps, in some hazy way: "<sup>12</sup> Now we see only a reflection dimly as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (Romans 13:12)

#### Contemplative Corner

*(Thought for the Week)*

God does not require great things of us. A moment of reflection, a pause to offer Him our thanks, or offer Him our aches and pains. He is always near. As a mother takes great delight when her toddler, busily lost in preoccupation, tosses the occasional glance back her way, God is delighted and warmed when we toss a glance back to Him, no matter how brief, in the middle of our day.

**Application:** The mystery of God often does look to us as arbitrary. Why did my mother die in her 30's while her mother and father lived into their 90's? Why does my cousin suffer from cancer, when I am apparently healthy? Why does one nightclub patron escape the carnage while others die nearby? Why do I have certain gifts while you have others? Why does one sibling succumb to bondage of drugs and alcohol while another achieves great fortune and success? What things in my circumstance are determined by God's will and which are merely allowed by Him? How do I approach the unexplainable and often unfathomable mysteries of life? Do these become occasions that deepen my faith walk, or are they stumbling blocks that keep me from accepting the love of God in my own life? Have there been reversals in my own life that point me back to the mysterious wonder of our Loving God?