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| **THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR**  **"The Conversion of the Pagan Sailors” Rev. Carl Haak August 7, 2011; No. 3579** |

 Dear radio friends,

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We return today to the study of the fascinating book of Jonah.  Last time we left Jonah in the belly of a fish, where he prayed to God from a place of darkness and unimaginable stench.  There God worked repentance in the heart of His child.  There Jonah was given to cast himself upon God, confess his sin, and say that he yearned again for God’s presence.  There we saw that Jonah also vowed a vow as a prophet:  he would go to Nineveh in obedience to the word and command of God.

      Today I want to return to the surface of the sea, which is now calm, back to the ship now resting easily on the water, and consider what we are told concerning the pagan sailors.  I read in [Jonah 1:14-16](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+1:14-16), “Wherefore they cried unto the Lord, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not upon us innocent blood:  for thou, O LORD, has done as it pleased thee.  So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea:  and the sea ceased from her raging.  Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows.”

      When we considered chapter 1 and looked at it from the point of view of God, who would not let go of Jonah, I suggested to you that there was a sub-plot in the chapter, with these pagan sailors.  The main theme of the book of Jonah is God’s sovereign mercy, that is, that God will show mercy to whom He will show mercy through Jesus Christ.  The book has, of course, much to teach us of God’s sovereign dealings with the disobedient man Jonah, how God arrested him in his disobedience, confronted him in his sin, brought him to acknowledge his sin, and brought him to repentance.  Now, as we turn our attention to these pagan sailors, we see a sub-plot tied with the very theme of the book itself—God’s sovereignty and mercy.

      God would show mercy to the Ninevites out of His own eternal good pleasure.  The carnal attitude of Israel in that day was that God’s mercy somehow belonged to them.  Therefore Jonah, expressing that attitude, was unwilling to go to Nineveh, lest God would show His mercy toward people that he did not consider worthy of that mercy.  So the theme of the book is God’s sovereign mercy.

      Now, with these pagan sailors, we see that, in spite of God’s disobedient prophet, God still is going to work through this prophet.  Through the witnessing and preaching that Jonah did on a boat, God is going to work conversion in the heart of pagan sailors, even as it pleased Him.

      Now you ask me, at the outset, what do you mean by conversion?  Are you not aware, you ask me, of much harmful and false teaching on the subject of conversion today?  Do you know that many insist that all true conversion must be made at a moment in one’s life through a conscious decision to accept Christ and that there is no possibility for any other type of true conversion?  So, they say, conversion means that you must be brought to a dramatic moment, perhaps even near death.  It must be a miraculous, memorable moment in your life.  You ask me, is that what you intend to make of these sailors?  Perhaps you ask me further the question:  Conversion—you mean, *genuine?*  Do you say that these pagan sailors were *genuinely*converted?  Do we not all know of conversions, so-called conversions, that were very short-lived, based only on emotions, and soon the sinners were found back in their old ways?

      My answer to that is this:  Conversion, according to the Scriptures, is the work of God’s grace in the heart of the born-again child of God—a work through His Spirit and Word and turning the sinner from the darkness of sin to the light of God.  Conversion is to be given a genuine, Spirit-worked reverence for God, so that one fears the Lord exceedingly.  Conversion is to live a new and thankful life before God.  Conversion is that of which we read in [Acts 26:18](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Acts+26:18):   “To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they might receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.”  Or again, [I Thessalonians 1:9, 10](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=I+Thessalonians+1:9,10):   “For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.”

      Conversion, according to Scripture, is a daily turning to God from sin, to God from a wicked world, to God from the devil’s temptations—a daily work of God in the heart of His child to give him sorrow for his sins and a turning to God in prayer, humility, trust, and service.  Conversion is seen in a life of unqualified obedience to God.

      Conversion is absolutely necessary.  It is not the work of man’s will, not something that *we* give to God but that He graciously works in the hearts of His children.  Conversion is an absolutely necessary work of God for, as Jesus said in [Luke 13:5](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Luke+13:5), “I tell you, Nay:  but, except ye  repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”

      Conversion is a great work of God’s power and grace.  Conversion is the bringing up into our consciousness of the life of Christ that God plants in our hearts, so that we see the horror of our sin and we turn from that sin to God.

      The narrative of these pagan sailors begins with the picture of the sailors in the nakedness and folly of their idolatry.  When the storm struck the boat they besought their gods, in frenzied crying, to deliver them.  They were in the darkness of their ignorance and unbelief and as far from God as could be.  And the narrative concludes with this testimony, “Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows.”    It was the opening of the eyes to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God.  All conversion is that great and powerful work of God.

      These men were converted in their adult life out of a previous life of paganism.  Normally, God in the covenant of His grace works the work of conversion in childhood.  We preach and we teach the Scriptures in the light of the glorious truth of the covenant of God’s grace, that God is the God of believers and their children.  Conversion is that daily work of His grace, even from childhood’s early days, so that I personally do not remember the moment that I was converted.  I was taught and brought up by my parents to turn to the Lord.  And the Holy Spirit made that instruction effective in my life.  Nevertheless, conversion is a great work of God.  God opens our eyes to the horror of sin not once, but repeatedly and daily, so that we see the folly of all else besides Him.  He convicts us of our helplessness and turns us to see Him in Christ as all of our life.

      Now do not envy these sailors.  They lived a previous life of shame.  They worshiped gods of wood and stone.  They gave their body over to every evil, to lust, and to all types of greed and cursing and having women in every port.  Thank God if He has spared your life from such shame and you have grown up in the covenant of God as a converted Christian—but do not lose sight of the greatness of conversion.  Conversion is not a life adjustment.  Conversion is not a coating on the life of the paint of religion.  But conversion is the great change that only God can make, from death to life, from darkness to light, from Satan to God.  Just because you never bowed to an idol physically, just because you never lived the life of a pagan sailor, do not think that God’s change made by grace in you, begun, perhaps in infancy, was a little thing.  It was a mighty thing.  It was a great thing, to God’s glory.  It was a work of God’s grace.  True conversion is by God’s grace in the heart through the Word of Christ.

      God may use many different means in connection with His Word.  He used for the sailors a stormy sea.  He used for the sailors spent strength.  They had rowed hard to bring their ship to land and they could not.  They were at the end of their resources.  Then God used the words of Jonah.  Jonah was a disobedient prophet, but nevertheless Jonah spoke the truth of God.  Through all of these things God converted.  The means that God uses cannot accomplish this unless He comes and turns the heart and makes those means effective.  God used the storm; God used the words of the prophet.  But you must see something in conversion that only God can give you to see.  It is not a twenty-foot wave crashing down upon your boat that is going to turn your heart to God in repentance.  It is not the conscious realization that the idol that you are bowing down to on the boat cannot save you, but if you hold on to it now, it is going to take you down to the bottom.  This knowledge will not produce the grace of conversion.

      Conversion is when God works in your heart, through these means, to turn you from your sin unto Him.  We read in [Acts 13:48](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Acts+13:48), “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.”  And, according to [Acts 18:27](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Acts+18:27), that believing is “through grace.”  God must work His work of grace.

      We know that it is our nature to push aside and forget moments of great stress and danger—even of drowning, falling through the ice.  Perhaps you have fallen through the ice and you thought you had found religion.  Or perhaps there are other emotional moments in your life.  But these things soon, for many, fade.  The dullness of sin returns, and a life of ease soon puts far away the memory of these former calamities.  Hardness is all that we would have before God.  Perhaps you even pride yourself that you are able to handle death.  You are able to enter into a funeral parlor and go through great distress and come back unshaken.  You are still “your own man.”  That is because of the hardness of your heart.  It is only the grace of God that brings conversion.

      As I said, God used means.  He used the storm.  He used the very threat of death.  These men stood at the realization that they were going to die.  At that moment they realized that there was something more important than their own lust.  Their values shifted.  God can use the fear of death as a blessing for His people.  Are you drunken with this life?  Have you ever given much thought to your own death, to eternity, to hell, to heaven?  Do you see that earthly things are dust and sand?  Or does your ease and your success and your plenty make you boast, no, make you like a beast, like a cow?  God used the threat of death.  God showed the utter impotence of their idols.  The sailors saw that their idols were totally inadequate.  Yes, God used all of these things.

      But, centrally, we must see that God used especially the words of His disobedient prophet.  The narrative gives us a brief summary of what Jonah said to them.  It suggests that Jonah said more to them.  But we do learn of a few things that Jonah said.  He said to them, first, that God is the God of heaven.  “I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven” (v. 9).  He told them that there is one, true, eternal, sovereign God who is the God of heaven.  He is not a God who has arisen from the earth out of the imaginations of men.  Oh, no!  He is the God of heaven, exalted, infinite in power and majesty.  He told them that this God made the sea and the dry land.  “Unlike the gods *you* made,” said Jonah.  “You made them by your hand.  The true God is the Creator of all things and holds the world in His hand.”  He told them that man was accountable to God.  We know that because the sailors say, “Lord, lay not upon us innocent blood, for thou hast done as it pleased thee.”  Jonah must have been teaching them some very sound things.  Jonah must have told them that God takes men up in judgment and that man must answer to God.  Jonah also had told them of the way to God, for he told them that he had fled from the presence of God.  He said to them, “I’m disobedient.  I walked away from the fellowship of God.”  And in those words he must have made plain to them that God, by grace, makes it possible for sinners to come unto Him through Jesus Christ.

      That is the message of the gospel right now in this very day.  In America, in Canada, or wherever you are as you hear this message, this is the truth:  There is one true God of heaven and earth who exists in Himself, who ever was and ever shall be.  He is the great and the holy God.  He is the Creator who has made you and holds you in His hands.  He will judge you and you must answer to Him.  There is but one way to His presence:  His grace and His Son Jesus Christ.

      The fruit of those words of Jonah, by the grace of God, was the conversion of pagan sailors.  It began in prayer.  They cried unto the Lord.  They used the name LORD, Jehovah, the God of the covenant.  They expressed the truth that God is the almighty God, that God has done, they say, as it hath pleased Him.  God rules, they say, in sovereign authority and untouchable justice.  They become very earnest, “We beseech thee.”  They cry to God in prayer, in utter dependence upon the sovereign and holy God.

      We are told that they feared the Lord exceedingly.  Now fear, in the Scriptures, can be used in the sense of mere dread, terror.  But here it is not used in that sense.  It is used in the sense of reverence and awe of God.  They feared the Lord exceedingly.  Their whole being was caught up in reverence for God.  They knew their undoneness as sinners.  They knew the greatness of the holy God.  They feared the Lord exceedingly.  Now notice, this is written *after* the storm ceased.  If we had read that they feared the Lord exceedingly *in* the storm, that would not have impressed us as much.  They would have been scared out of their wits.  Perhaps they were like a soldier in a fox hole who cries, “Get me out of this, I don’t want to die, God.  I’ll become a missionary.”  Then he is delivered and he turns to his buddy and says, “Boy, that was a close call.  Let’s celebrate when we get some leave and we’ll drink and gamble.”  But that is not what happened.  After the storm had ceased, a new reverence grips their hearts and they cry unto God in reverence and in thankfulness.

      They sacrificed to the Lord, we are told, and made their vows.  They sacrificed.  What did they sacrifice?  How could they do that after a storm upon a boat?  We do not know.  We mind our own business.  God tells us that they sacrificed.  But it does tell us this, that they understood that the approach to God that He had revealed in the Old Testament was in the way of sacrifice, of thanksgiving and praise.  Even as we read in [Psalm 51](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Psalm+51), “Create in me a clean heart, O God.  The sacrifices of the Lord are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O Lord, thou wilt not despise.”  And they made vows.  That means that they made a solemn acknowledgment of God’s claims upon them—that they would serve and obey Him, that they would dedicate themselves by His power and grace to His service, that they would live and die in His fear, that they would now live with one consuming desire:  Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?

      This was great grace.

      In the conversion of these pagan sailors God was underscoring the wickedness of Israel’s impenitence in the days of Jonah.  God was doing as He had told them, that He would raise up a people who formerly did not know Him in order to provoke those to jealousy who did, in their generations, know Him.  What was the state of Israel in Jonah’s day?  We read in the Old Testament that they wearied of Jehovah, they turned to the very gods these sailors dumped over into the sea.  Is that not something?  The gods that these sailors realize are stumps of wood and heave overboard were the very idols that Israel, the people who had the priests and the temple and the sacrifices and the prophets and the promises, was turning to.

      We would say, where on earth would you look for repentance and holiness?  Would you not look in Israel?  No!  Israel turns from God to testify of the horror, the folly of it.  God raises up pagans to know and fear Him.

      There is a word there to us.  Do you have the Word of God?  You have a sound church you attend.  You know the truth.  You have been taught that truth as it is in Jesus Christ from your childhood’s early days.  Does the zeal and love of converts from paganism in Ghana, the Philippines, the Far East shame you?  Does their zeal show you to be guilty of indifference?  Does it show that your heart has been swallowed up in the things of this earth?  God calls you to be to His praise.  God calls you to a daily, genuine conversion.  Turn from your idols to the living God!  Do not worship pleasure; do not worship money; do not worship lust, and honor, and fame — the gods of the heathen.  Worship and serve God!

      We must be filled with gratitude for what God has done for us and we must see the greatness of His grace.  Do you bless God for conversion, for opening your eyes, turning you from your folly, and giving to you a hope that shall never make you ashamed?  Then, let us pray today:  “Turn me, Lord, and I shall be turned.  For Thou art the Lord my God.”

      Let us pray.

      Father, thanks for Thy Word.  Bind it to our hearts.  Amen.