

“Like Me” (Jonah Series) / 3: “The World’s Storms” / February 16, 2020

Key Texts: Jonah 1.1-4

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Summary: Not every storm is a result of sin, but every sin brings a storm. But God is neither inattentive, or passive. See how God works in the storms.

“Life is tough.” I think the first time I really heard that was when I was in seminary, applying to some PhD programs. Some of them can be really hard to get into. I remember opening a letter from one school, rejecting me. I was really bummed. A friend of mine named Tom Jones saw me bummed and asked me what my problem was. So I told him. And he looked at me and said, “Life’s tough, Pattison, let’s go play ball.” I looked at him like he was a real jerk, and then I said, “Yeah, you’re right. Let’s go play ball.” And I just kind of stole that line and made it mine. When my soccer players used to whine like babies, I’d just tell them, “Life’s tough.” My kids have heard it 1000 times – “Life’s tough!” Because it’s true, isn’t it? Life really is tough ... sometimes.

I found these on the internet. Now I know, most all these guys are old. So if you have never heard these names, just humor us old guys!

- Here’s John Wayne. Any of you old guys remember him? He says, “Life is tough. It’s tougher if you’re stupid.” I like that one.
- Here’s Katherine Hepburn. Any of you really, really old guys remember her? She says, Life is hard. After all, it kills you.”
- George Carlin put it like this. He says, “Life is tough. Then you die.” No kidding.
- I actually like the way Susan Sarandon put it. Not quite so old. She says, “If you’re upset with how you look at 25, life’s going to be tough.” That’s pretty funny!
- Here’s Johnny Cash. Johnny Cash was old when he was young. He said, “Life is rough, so you gotta be tough.” You could probably make a country song out of that!
- One more, this one has a little different tone. This one is by a poet, named “Alfa,,: from Louisville. She says, “She’s been through more Hell than you’ll ever know. But, that’s what gives her beauty an edge... You can’t touch a woman who can wear pain like the grandest of diamonds around her neck.” That’s pretty good!

Bottom line, life is tough ... a lot. We get sick, sometimes really sick – that’s tough. We break things. These bodies are tough, but they are breakable. But times that are tough physically aren’t necessarily the toughest. A friend dies, a parent dies, a kid dies. Or, there’s betrayal, and a friendship dies, or a marriage dies. Or, you are bullied, or your kid is bullied. Or, maybe your reputation is tainted, or destroyed. Or, you’re abused ... physically, sexually, emotionally. Or maybe it’s just some failure: you fail a class, you’re fired at a job, you fail to reach some goal, some dream. Or maybe it’s some destructive addiction. Bottom line, I don’t care who you are, life can be tough, right? You’ve been there, felt that.

And sometimes that makes life quite confusing. Why?! Why is ... life so tough? Why does life have to be so tough? Especially if you believe in perfectly good, perfectly loving, perfectly powerful God, and you’re trying to play by his rules, for the most part. I mean seriously, if there really is a good, loving, powerful God, why does life have to be so hard ... especially for believers, for Jesus-followers? Is it God’s fault? At the least, it seems like he’s allowing your life to be tough, right? At the worst, he’s causing your life to be tough, right? You hear stuff like this a lot: “God has to have a plan.” “God’s got a reason! Everything happens for a reason!” I found these two pics:

- “Give thanks to God for whatever happens in life. Nothing is a mistake ...” Nothing is a mistake?! Which seems to me like ... sheer ... poppycock.
- Or this one: “Whatever happens in my life happens with the wish of God, happens for my good, happens for my progress...” Again ... poppycock!

But then ... we read verses like Jonah 1.4 and sometimes we think that’s what the Bible teaches. Here’s how this little book of Jonah opens up. Verse 1: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish (which is the opposite way). He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. (Then here it is, verse 4 --) Then the Lord sent (God sent, God caused) a great wind on the sea (God sent a storm), and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.” God did that. And he did ... do that, he did cause that storm ... that time.

But guys, it is virtually blasphemy to blame all our storms on God. God did not program in advance everything that will happen in this world. God doesn’t cause evil, God doesn’t choreograph sin. He gives us the freedom to choose right and wrong, and when we choose badly – when we choose against God’s will -- people get hurt. Actually, there are at least three different reasons you will have trouble in this world.

#1: We just live in a broken world. Things in this world are not as God intended. So sometimes life is tough simply because we live in a broken world.

- That coronavirus that keeps spreading ... The people that get it, the people who die ... they are not being punished by God for some sin. They just live in a broken world. These bodies get sick, these bodies break, these bodies die.
- Your car hydroplanes or, you lose control on black ice. Sometimes it’s no one’s fault. And God didn’t do that! Sometimes life’s just tough.
- I battle skin cancer, because I baked in the sun as a kid and didn’t use sunscreen. Looking back, it was stupid. Not sinful, just stupid. And now it’s a nuisance. God doesn’t give me skin cancer.
- This church was torn down by a tornado in 1974. Devastated this place. Massive wildfires in Australia. God’s not some cosmic arsonist! Floods, hurricanes, tornadoes ... they are just part of living in a broken world.

So, sometimes life is tough just because we live in a broken world. But sometimes ... #2: sometimes we suffer because someone sins ... someone else sins. You have been there. There are people who have made your life really, really tough.

- Maybe you had an abnormally bad parent, who abused you in some way ... physically, sexually, emotionally.
- Or maybe you had a friend who betrayed you, or an enemy who bullied you, or a colleague who undermined you. I’ll bet most of you have experienced all three.
- Maybe some drunk ran into your car, or some addict robbed you.
- Several years back one guy from our church family was going home at lunch to check on some new kittens. Two guys were there, robbing his house. They brutalized him and then murdered him. Don’t you dare say God caused that. That was sin, that was evil, that was a violation of God’s will!

So, sometimes life is tough because we live in a broken world; and, sometimes life is tough because there are sinners all around us. And #3: sometimes life is tough because we sin, and sin always drags a storm behind it. Always.

- Maybe you are the one who struggles with some addiction, like porn, or alcohol, or some illegal drug, or even some legal painkiller. And you see – when you are ruthlessly honest, you recognize how it messes up your life, and also the lives of those around you. You are making life tough!
- Or, maybe you are the one who has been unfaithful, and you have felt the pain your unfaithfulness has caused both you, and those you love. That storm is on you!
- Or, maybe you are the one with self-control issues: you spend too much, or you eat too much, or you talk too much ... and you're making life tough, on yourself, and on others. You know that!
- Or, maybe you have anger issues, or you're just mean ... sometimes. God isn't making your life tough! You are! Do you buy that? Do you own that?

So, here's Jonah. He's in a boat somewhere on the Mediterranean Sea. An unnaturally fierce storm blows in. They were pretty good with boats back then, but when you are on a smallish boat a fierce storm is terrifying! The boat is threatening to capsize. There's no help around. The crew goes from sailing to praying ... it's time to get ready to meet your maker. ... And ... And ... this is one of those times that God did do it. This storm isn't just the product of a broken world, God sent this storm. Now, if you are one of the sailors, life's tough because someone else sinned – Jonah sinned. If you're Jonah, your life is tough because you sinned. I've been in both spots ... many times. So have you.

Here's the deal; here's the big idea you need to catch: Your life isn't tough just because you sin; but ... but ... every time you sin life is going to get tough, for you, and probably for someone else too. Tim Keller, wrote a great little book called, "The Prodigal Prophet." We've got copies in our connections room if you want to purchase one and follow along. Keller put it like this. He says, "Every act of disobedience to God – every act of disobedience -- has a storm attached to it." "The Bible does not say that every difficulty is the result of sin – but it does teach that every sin – every sin – will bring you into difficulty." Every sin drags trouble behind it; every sin you sin will mess you up ... eventually ... and it will usually mess up someone else's life, too.

Do you know why? Do you know why sin makes life so tough? ... Well ... Did you ever break something because you didn't use it the way it was designed to be used?

- I know the manual tells me to change the oil in my truck every 3,000 miles. But I think that's a scam, so I'll change mine every 20,000 miles. That will probably work, won't it? ... For a while.
- I know the doctor told me to take 2 pills twice a day. But he's kind of wussy. I want relief now. I think I'll take 4 pills, 4 times a day. That might make you might feel great ... for a while.

Here's the idea:

- You can't mistreat your body and expect good health. You eat too much, and drink too much, and sleep too little, and exercise too little, and wonder why your health isn't good.
- You can't treat people poorly and expect strong relationships. Diss my wife, diss my friends, diss my boss, and wonder why my marriage is struggling, my friends are bailing, and my job is floundering.
- You can't all be self-centered and rude and expect a church, or town, or a country to be peaceful and prosperous. Right? Look around! Read the news!

Here it is: When we violate our design, when we violate our God given purposes, life gets tough! When we violate our Creator's Users Manual, we can't expect life to go well. We were built by God to love God first and to love each other. We were built by God to serve God first and to serve each other. Try to do life any other way, and your sin will mess you up. And it will probably mess up the people around you as well.

Now ... sometimes the storm caused by your sin will be immediate and catastrophic. Jonah jumps in a boat to run away from God, and he doesn't get very far before God sends this storm. Stops him in his tracks.

- She gets drunk, and hits someone head on. Immediate and catastrophic.
- He flies into a rage, grabs a gun, and ... life gets really, really tough, immediately and catastrophically.
- He overdoses, and it's over ... for him. But not for his wife, and kids, and friends.

But more often sin works like radiation. You don't feel much at first; things seem fine at first. A few of you might remember that I used this cream on my face a few months ago to treat skin cancer. It felt fine at first; cool, smooth, actually quite pleasant. A few weeks later, my face was a mess, and it hurt. Most of the time, sin is like that. It feels good ... at first.

- You tell a lie and it works ... at first. You don't see the damage it is doing to your character, or to their trust.
- The flirtations lead to sex. And the sex is magnificent ... at first. It's all good, till your wife finds out, and your kids find out, and your parents find out, and at some point you have to come clean with God. There's a storm coming!

Bottom line – and I'll bet a lot of you have never thought of it like this – bottom line, all sin is suicidal. Maybe not in the moment. In the moment it may seem right, and good; but every sin will drag trouble behind it ... eventually. Every sin will destroy you ... eventually. Because sin is like an addictive drug. In the moment it feels good. Then there's shame. Then it feels good again. And then maybe a little less shame. And it pulls you back again, and it feels good again. And you get better and better at minimizing the shame. And all while it is searing your conscience, and corrupting your heart, and undermining your relationships, and driving a wedge between you and your God, diminishing your hope, and stealing your joy.

Which would be bad enough, if your sin was only messing you up. But guys, sin splatters. Your sin splatters on me; my sin splatters on you.

- Have you ever noticed that you struggle with some of the same sins your parents struggled with? Maybe they were angry and yelled a lot; and you do too. Maybe they were unfaithful to each other, and ... statistics tell us that you'll be more likely to do the same.
- Or, have you noticed that you struggle with some of the same sins as your friends, the guys you hang out with? You pull them into your sins, and they pull you into their sins. And even if they don't pull you in, their selfishness, or their meanness, or their lack of self-control will hurt you ... inevitably. Because sin splatters.

So, let's do a quick review of what we've covered so far:

- It's virtually blasphemy to blame all our storms on God. God doesn't cause evil, he doesn't choreograph sin. Sometimes life is tough because we live in a broken world. Sometimes life is tough because people around us sin. And sometimes life is tough because we sin.
- But, even though "The Bible does not say that every difficulty is the result of sin – but it does teach that every sin – every sin – will bring you into difficulty."

- Why? Because we can't violate our God created design and our God given purposes without life getting tough. When we violate our Creator's Users Manual, we can't expect life to go well.
- So, all sin is fundamentally suicidal. Sometimes the consequences of our sin are sudden and catastrophic; more often they are slow acting ... but devastating.
- Finally, sin splatters. Your sin splatters on me, and my sin splatters on you. You've been on both sides of that equation.

Now, let's get back to the Jonah story. God tells Jonah to go east and preach to the hated city of Nineveh. Jonah thinks God is out of his mind, so he gets on a boat and heads west towards Tarshish. Now ... what would you have done, if you were God? What would you do if one of your servants refused his assignment? What would you do if one of your kids ran away from an assignment you assigned? What would you have done, if you were God?

- Would it have been more merciful, more loving just to let him go? Would that have been better for Jonah, or for the Ninevites, or for us?
- Would it have been better for God to find someone else to go to Nineveh, someone a little braver, a little less hateful? Would that have been better for Jonah, or for the Ninevites, or for us?

Or think about it this way. What if you were Jonah? What if God gave you an assignment you didn't want to do? "Send someone else, God! This one is not in my wheel-house, this one is not in my heart!" Or maybe you are just scared. Or maybe you just flat out disagree with God? "God, I'm not doing it! These people don't deserve your ... grace! They deserve hell, God!"

If you were Jonah, would you go? If God needed someone to go to a dangerous place to minister to some damaged people who weren't likely to be receptive to anything to say, would you go? I was asked last week if I knew a young couple who would move to Bosnia and work with a small church there. The city was bombed incessantly during the Serbian-Bosnian War in the 1990's. Most of the men were killed, either in battle, or taken alive as prisoners and killed in front of their families. The church is made up of just a few survivors, widows, mothers and children of those men. If God nudged you, would you go?

Well, God sends this storm ... a ferocious storm. Kind of a "come to Jesus" storm for Jonah and all the rest of the guys on his boat. They are terrified! They start tossing their cargo overboard to lighten their load. ...

Do you think you have ever encountered a storm ... sent by God ... to turn you around? Probably never one this ferocious. But have you ever been on your way to sin and maybe it's like God puts this roadblock in your way? It's kind of like God is somehow trying to block your path, to make you pause, to give you the time to think again. Rarely are God's roadblocks impenetrable ... for now. God won't force himself on us ... yet.

- Maybe you got in your car, intending to go somewhere to do something wrong, and you had car trouble. That's happened to me. And Randy tells me that it happened to one of his staff guys, a guy named Donnie. Apparently, when he was younger, Donnie was on his way to buy some dope when his car broke down. It's never convenient when your car breaks down. But by the time he could get the car going, the dealer had moved that batch of drugs along. Donnie wonders today whether God was in the car trouble.
- Maybe you made up your mind to do something wrong, but before acted on your nefarious plan, you got this phone call that rattled your cage.
- Or, maybe you were heading down some path of self-destruction and you had this encounter with someone who seemed stationed there by God to prick your conscience.

- Or maybe you were reading the Bible and some verse jumped off the page, or you were in church and it seemed like God just punched you in the face.
- Or maybe it was a simple touch, or hug, or smile, that pulled you back.

God has been called, “the hound of heaven,” because he chases, he coaxes, he cajoles, he nudges ... even when we are intent on sinning ... because he loves ... us. And so sometimes he sends a storm ... or some kind of roadblock. Or at the least he uses the storms, the tough times, the rough patches ... to turn us, and to shape us, ... and to save others.

I’ll bet when you look back you can see how God has used tough times in your life to turn you around, or to make you stronger, or to use you. God does some of his best work in the middle of a storm ... if you let him. Sometimes storms are more like an intervention, than a punishment.

And what if ... what if the storm you went through didn’t help you, but it helped someone else? Would it be worth it? Would it be worth it to crash and burn if it kept your kid from crashing and burning? It’s kind of weird, isn’t it? These sailors on the boat with Jonah – they end up seeing the real God, and honoring the real God. How cool is that! So ... is it okay if God takes you through a few storms ... for their sake?

So ... There are going to be storms, you’re going to go through tough times. That’s a fact. Storms create messes. That’s a fact, too. Bad things happen to good people. That, too, is true. Let me give you one more take on this, as I wrap this up. This is kind of how Andy Stanley put it. He says,

“Why would a good God allow bad things to happen?” (repeat) We all wonder that, don’t we? For some of you, this question marked the end of your faith in God, maybe. But what is interesting about this question is that, when we ask it – and we all ask it, sometimes – when we ask this question we are focused on the bad ... out there, ... not the bad... in here. So, here’s the follow up question: “Have you ever done anything bad?” (Don’t raise your hand!) So, have you ever rephrased the question like this: “How could a good God ever allow me to happen?” Cause it seems like you’re saying, “If God was good, he would have done something about me by now.” Huh! Never looked at it that way, I bet.

If the disciples were here with us, if Peter or James or John were here with us today, they might slow us down, before we jump off a cliff or something. Peter might say, “Wait, guys! Hang on! I saw something that might help you with your dilemma. I saw God in a body coexist with evil men. I saw God in a body pursue evil men. And the God I saw in a body did not prove He was God by eliminating all evil ... like me. He did something else. He loved me ... and then He went to work eliminating the evil in me.”

John might add, “I know this is a big emotional question; I’m not sure I can sort through all of it for you. But this I know, I saw our perfectly good God, and I saw horrendous evil, and they can coexist. But it’s nothing like you might imagine.” Our God is not silent, or indifferent.

Guys, life is tough. In fact, right now some of you may be going through terrible storms. And some of you are like, “I can’t see how anything good can come out of what’s happening in my life right now.” But guys, there is a God. And he’s powerful, and he’s good. We believe in the God who goes before us to head us off; we believe in the God who meets us in the storm; we believe in the God who works to save those who are innocent from the damage caused by those who are not. We believe in the God who redeems damaged goods and makes mosaics that are incredibly beautiful.

I live surrounded by people who survived storms. Surrounded by people who came out changed for the better. I'm one of them. I live surrounded by men and women who were saved because of some storm. We trust the God who is silent when we think he shouldn't be. We believe he is there. And we believe he is working, in his own time, in his own way. We've seen it! And we believe the best is coming!