



Jonah

The Man Who Ran and the God Who Ran After Him

SMALL GROUPS STUDY GUIDE

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Introduction to the book of Jonah

Included for background

The book of Jonah relates how the “word of the LORD” came to Jonah, a Hebrew prophet who lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel (793–753 BC). The LORD told Jonah to go to the foreign city of Nineveh and call its people to repentance. This city was the capital of the Assyrian empire, which would soon threaten the very existence of Jonah’s nation. For this reason, he was much more inclined to see it destroyed because of its wickedness than to help it be spared. So Jonah boarded a ship and fled in the opposite direction. God sent a storm to intercept him, and this put the ship’s entire crew in danger. Jonah was forced to admit to everyone on the boat, “It is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.” He told the crew to throw him into the sea, and when they reluctantly did, the storm stopped. When the sailors saw this miracle, they worshipped the true God. The book says that God “provided” a great fish to swallow Jonah, and that when the prophet realized that inside the fish he was at least safe from drowning, he thanked God. It’s unclear though if Jonah’s heart had really changed. After three days, the fish spit him up onto dry land.

At this point, the story seems to start again. It tells how the “word of the LORD” came to Jonah a second time, and how he took another journey, this one toward Nineveh instead of away from it. The book relates that when he announced God was about to overthrow the city, the people turned to God. The danger passed, as God showed compassion on the repentant Ninevites. And once again, Jonah addressed himself to God, this time not in thanksgiving, but in complaint. He resented having played a role in preserving a nation that could destroy his own. The book says that God *provided* a vine to shelter Jonah from the sun, then *provided* a worm to kill the vine, and then *provided* a scorching wind to intensify the heat. When Jonah complained how distressed he was over the loss of the vine, God asked whether he himself was not justified in being distressed over the potential destruction of a great city and all its inhabitants. The book ends with that question.

It is not known when the book of Jonah was written or who wrote it. Tradition ascribes authorship to Jonah, but because the book portrays him negatively, it’s possible that someone else wrote the account at a later time. *If so, the narrator may be attempting to speak to the situation of a later generation of Israelites who have become exclusive in their understanding of God’s grace.* In the book, Jonah seems to represent the attitude that many of the people of Israel had at various times toward other nations. Instead of recognizing their mission to help these nations come to know the true God, they considered them their enemies and expected God to destroy them. So God’s final question to Jonah is also being posed to the nation of Israel at large or to any readers of this book who may have this attitude.

We do not need to know when the book was actually written in order to appreciate its message. The people of God in all places and times have a special mission to help others come to know the true God and his grace. They should not see those outside the community of faith as their enemies and expect God to trample them down before them. Instead, they should rejoice in—and certainly not resent—the fact that they serve “*a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.*”

Week One | Jonah 1.1-3

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. 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.

[Read the following either out loud or silently and discuss the questions as a group.]

One night, as I’m settling down to read my three-year-old daughter stories before bed, she asks me to read from a book of children’s Bible stories that her grandmother has recently given her. I open the book to a random story: David and Goliath. Like most children’s books, there are enthusiastic and colorful pictures of all the characters—so for this story, a giant angry man stands ready to tear a puny little David limb by limb. I figure being pummeled by a giant might not be the best image to send her to sleep with, so I flip to the next story: Daniel in the lion’s den. Naturally, there are several ravenous lions, mouths agape, saliva dripping from their fangs, looking with hunger to the corner where Daniel is soiling himself out of fear. That doesn’t seem quite right either, so I turn the pages to another story: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. Hmm.

Why is it that certain biblical stories endure in our faith primarily as children’s stories?

Frederick Buechner offers us an interesting perspective in his book *The Hungering Dark*: “Not, I suspect, because children particularly want to read them, but more because their elders particularly do not want to read them or at least do not want to read them for what they actually say and so make them instead into fairy tales, which no one has to take seriously. But for all our stratagems, the legends, the myths continue to embody truths or intuitions which in the long run it is perhaps more dangerous to evade than to confront.”

Another possibility is that we give them to children because these stories ask us to believe the impossible. We’re much too hardened by reality for these kinds of stories; life teaches us early that the little guy rarely wins, that hungry animals bite, and that if you play with fire you usually get burned. But maybe children are the keepers of these stories because they are the only ones with an imagination capable of handling the truth—for God, even the impossible is possible.

And God is looking for people who will partner with him in making the impossible possible.

Questions to Discuss

- Do you remember the first time you heard the story of Jonah? What do you remember about hearing this story as a child?
- Frederick Buechner suggests that there is something rich in the Bible stories that we give to children that adults would rather not hear. What about Jonah’s story is difficult for people to hear? What about it is difficult for you?
- Has God ever asked you to try something that seems impossible?

As for Jonah, nothing could be more impossible than being sent to Nineveh. Jonah is a Hebrew prophet, an Israelite; Nineveh is the capital of Assyria—a powerful neighboring nation with a long history of brutality, war and conquest. In fact, in 722 BC Assyria crushed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, sending its people into exile and wiping it off the map forever. The Assyrians are the enemy. They are the very ones threatening God’s people. Nineveh is a dark, wicked place. Yet God tells Jonah, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” [v. 2, NASB]

In Hebrew, however, this passage can be translated differently. “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry out *concerning* it, for its wickedness has come up before my face.”

God isn’t just sending Jonah to cry out against Nineveh.
God is sending Jonah to cry out *concerning* Nineveh.
God looks to Nineveh, the dark, wicked city, and is concerned.

For God to send Jonah to Nineveh would be like God telling a present day Jewish rabbi, “Go to Tehran the great city, and cry out concerning it.” Or to a South Korean pastor, “Go to Pyongyang the great city, and cry out concerning it.”

This seems like an unthinkable task to Jonah, requiring him to believe that God’s love extends even to the enemy. God is concerned about what happens in the darkest corners of the earth, and he sends his people to be a presence in those dark places.

Questions to Discuss

- Jesus tells his followers to love their enemies. He doesn’t say, “if you have enemies, then you should love them.” The assumption is that having enemies is a part of what it means to be human in a fractured world. Who are the people you regard as enemies, whether past or present? Why?
- Does extending God’s love to an enemy seem risky? Why?
- How is God calling you to be a presence in the midst of your enemies and to cry out concerning them?

Immediately, without hesitation, Jonah arises as he has been commanded. But he doesn’t go to Nineveh. Instead he takes off for the Mediterranean coast to catch the first ship headed to Tarshish.

Nineveh is located in present day Iraq. Tarshish is in southern Spain, at the other end of Jonah’s world.

The journey by ship would take almost a year and would have been extremely expensive and very dangerous. Not only is Tarshish about as far as Jonah can get from Nineveh, but in the ancient world, people thought of Tarshish like we think of Tahiti or Hawaii. It is an escape, and it seems there is no price that Jonah isn’t willing to pay to escape.

Most of us know the way to Tarshish.

Like Jonah, we’ve paid the fare at one point or another. The escape to Tarshish for some people takes the form of shopping, where the temporary fascination with something new takes your mind off of Nineveh. For others there is the workplace—going to work or bringing work home keeps them from

having to ever really be home. Others retreat inside; they escape by isolating themselves from everyone around them, keeping everyone at arm's length. Some fill their lives with busyness to ignore their inner dissatisfaction with life; some escape in pornography, a sense of intimacy without any strings.

Tarshish is all around us, and we go there often.

But the truth, Eugene Peterson says, is simply this: "Tarshish is a lie". The release, the distraction, the satisfaction of escape is only a temporary and fleeting fix. You can only run for so long before you realize that life on this side of the fence is quickly becoming just like life was back on that side. The common denominator, of course, is you. Your own heart. As the saying goes, wherever you go, there you are.

The world doesn't need people who are good at jumping fences. It needs people who go to Nineveh. God is inviting us to embrace the darkness, the broken cracks and crevices of the world. It's there that we find him. Those places come up before God's face, and he is concerned. God wants to meet you in Nineveh, and in that seemingly impossible place, he wants to change everything.

Why do we run? Jonah isn't the first prophet to be on the run. Moses did some running of his own. Moses had murdered an Egyptian, and when it becomes known, he flees to the wilderness. Moses ran from his past. Elijah did some running too. He flees to the wilderness after defeating the prophets of Baal, afraid because Queen Jezebel wants him dead. Elijah ran out of fear.

But Jonah's running was different. The Hebrew phrase used to describe Jonah's running is *mi lifnei*. It suggests a rupture of contact, a turning of one's back. It means flat out rebellion. In fact, the same phrase is used to describe Cain's departure from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 4.16, "So Cain went out of the LORD's presence and settled in the land of Nod, East of Eden." Notice how Jonah 1.2 repeats the phrase "away from the presence of the LORD" twice. Whenever biblical writers, especially Hebrew writers, want you to get the point, they repeat words or phrases multiple times.

Jonah runs because he thinks he knows better than God about how the world ought to work. As far as Jonah is concerned, "those people" in Nineveh don't deserve a warning. The only thing God ought to be concerned about for Nineveh is destroying them once and for all. In a way, Jonah's running is about control. Jonah escapes to Tarshish under the illusion that he can somehow control God, or at the very least thwart what it is that God wants to do.

So as Jonah settles in for the long journey to Tarshish, he appears to have everything under control. His plan is working, but there are clouds in the distance.

Questions to Discuss

- How do you escape? What is your Tarshish?
- Most of us live with the illusion that we're in control. We give lip service to God but often trust in ourselves more than we trust in God. In what ways do you trust in your own perspective and power rather than God's?
- What is it in your life right now that God has called you to do—and trust him with it—that you're running away from?

Week Two | Jonah 1.4-17

Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. 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.

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 so that we will not perish."

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. So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased." Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

[Read the following either out loud or silently and discuss the questions as a group.]

Prophets led peculiar lives. They cried out against injustice, wrongdoing and evil. They regularly reminded Israel of the ways in which it was failing to be the nation that God had called it to be. And prophets weren't afraid to name names. Consequently, they were usually at odds with the people of Israel, especially those in positions of power and authority. The Israelites didn't appreciate being disrupted by the truth that God's dream for the world was vastly different from their own. In fact, they just wanted prophets who would tell them what they wanted to hear: Jerusalem is God's Holy City, it can never be conquered, don't listen to these clowns telling you that unless you change your ways God is going to send judgment—they don't know what they're talking about.

The Israelites preferred false prophets to true prophets.

They preferred a god who conformed to their own agenda, and they surrounded themselves with false prophets who supported their version of God.

It's a kind of idolatry that happens still. We maintain illusions about how we think the world works, how we think God works, and we don't like being confronted with the idea that God doesn't operate according to our different agendas. Some of us hold fast to the illusion that life is fair, that people can simply work hard, pull themselves up by the bootstraps and do anything in this world they set their minds to.

Those of us who hold to this illusion don't like to hear Jesus' parable about the workers in the vineyard: Some workers worked a full day while others worked only an hour, but both were paid the same. Nor do we like Jesus' story of the prodigal son who runs off and blows his inheritance and gets welcomed home with a party.

Jesus is clear: life isn't fair. The world doesn't run according to our own efforts. It runs according to the mercy of God, who, in his kindness, gives to every person as he chooses, and then expects those he blesses to turn around and be a blessing to others.

We hold fast to the illusion that we are in control, and it's no surprise that we feel the most fear and anxiety when control is taken away from us. We believe that if we play by the rules and keep our noses clean that no evil will ever befall us; that if we do A, B, and C as we raise our children, that they will turn out perfect and make good choices.

Then there is the illusion that God is *for* certain people, people like us, and *against* certain others, people not like us. We think of "those people" in the same way Jonah thinks of the Ninevites. Whatever illusions we have, we use them to shape God in whatever way is most convenient for us, and of course, anyone who disagrees with us isn't really disagreeing with us. They're disagreeing with God.

One of the most interesting aspects of Jesus' ministry was that he was constantly disrupting people's notions of what God was like. Allowing ourselves to be disrupted and surprised that God is different than we think is a significant part of growing in the faith. Jonah is disrupted by the call to Nineveh. The Pharisees and religious leaders were disrupted by Jesus' affiliation with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. We need to pay attention to those moments when God disrupts us.

Questions to Discuss

- We may be hesitant or unwilling to see our own illusions, but we tend to be experts at seeing them in other people. How do you see other people shaping God in their own image?
- In what ways do you think you have shaped God in your image?
- When have you been disrupted by God? When have you experienced God to be different from what you thought?

While Jonah is never called a false prophet, he has some illusions of his own. Namely, the illusion that he can control God by running away to Tarshish, and the illusion that God's love only extends to Israel. Jonah simply cannot fathom a God who would care about Israel's enemies.

Picture Jonah staring out at the sea, completely oblivious to the fact that the wind is starting to pick up and the waves are growing by the minute. He's probably muttering something on the order of, "He can't be serious. I won't let him do it. I'll hide out in Tarshish for a while." Thinking he has everything under control, Jonah goes below deck to sleep. Then it happens. The Scriptures say that the LORD sends such a violent wind that the ship threatens to break into pieces on the open sea. The sailors have no doubt seen their fair share of storms before, but this is different. They are terrified and start throwing cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Finally, they simply resort to calling out to their gods, none of which seemed to be listening.

The captain goes below deck and finds Jonah sleeping. “Get up and call on your god!”

And at this point, the drama of the story moves so quickly that we often miss something vital. Everyone is praying, and the captain asks Jonah, a prophet of the Lord, to pray. But Jonah remains silent. Most of the time when reading the Bible, we finish one sentence and simply begin reading the next. We don’t always recognize the significance of silence in the story.

Imagine that a woman says to a man, “I love you.” But instead of saying “I love you too,” the man smiles and gives the woman an awkward hug. His silence is clear; he does not love her and can’t bring himself to say it. The same thing is at work here with Jonah. In this moment, his silence is his way of saying to God, “Over my dead body—I’ll go to the bottom of the sea before I go to Nineveh.” Somehow, with the ship rocking to and fro, the sailors manage to cast lots and find out that the storm was because of Jonah. But Jonah doesn’t give up his illusions easily. Instead, he tells the sailors to throw him overboard.

Illusions are like that. We don’t give them up easily. In fact, we don’t normally give them up at all until they stop working for us altogether. And like Jonah, sometimes the only thing that can save us is to be thrown overboard, to have our illusions stripped away. There are storms that blow up out of nowhere and upset our agendas. We get brought to our knees by suffering.

And in many ways, storms bring with them a kind of salvation. They rescue us from ourselves because we are never more open to God’s bigness than when we are most aware of our own smallness and helplessness. Storms mess with our agendas. Suffering, more than anything, shapes us in the way of Jesus. It softens us and opens us to a kind of Christ-likeness that we wouldn’t experience otherwise.

Jonah’s hang up is that he doesn’t want to face the darkness in Nineveh, but one wonders if he’s running just as much from the darkness in himself. God is inviting us to give up our petty illusions. When we say that someone is *disillusioned*, what we often mean is they’ve had a rough go of things and have stopped hoping and only see the negative. In part, that’s true. Our hopes and expectations can only be crushed so many times before we give them up: better to not be disappointed than to get let down again.

Yet it seems that God is looking for disillusioned people because they’re the only ones who stand a chance at seeing the world as he sees it. God is longing for people to move “from illusion to prayer, from false certainty to true uncertainty, and from the many safe gods to the God whose love has no limit.” [Nouwen, *Reaching Out*] But for the moment, Jonah is so deeply entrenched in his illusions that he simply refuses to pray.

Questions to Discuss

- Why do you think suffering “opens us to a kind of Christ-likeness that wouldn’t otherwise be possible”?
- What does it mean to move from “false certainty to true uncertainty”?
- What storms have you faced in your life that reshaped how you understood God and the world?
- What “storm”—external or internal—are you facing now that is revealing your own illusions about God?

Week Three | Jonah 2.1-10

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. He said:

“In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me.
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.
You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers swept over me.
I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’
The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around
my head.
To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.
But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit.
When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your
holy temple.
Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit God’s love for them.
But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’”

And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

[Read the following either out loud or silently and discuss the questions as a group.]

There is a story in the gospel of Mark that is fascinating in its similarities to Jonah’s adventure on the boat. In Mark 4.35-40, Jesus and his disciples are on a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee when a raging storm threatens to sink the boat.

Like Jonah, Jesus is asleep down below.

Like Jonah, Jesus is awakened by his terrified companions.

Unlike Jonah, Jesus doesn’t remain silent. He speaks up, and the sea becomes calm. Jonah knew that if he prayed the sea would become calm, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

Prayer plays a significant role in the story of Jonah. On three separate occasions people who are in trouble cry out to God—first the sailors on the ship, then Jonah in the belly of the fish, and finally in chapter 3 the Ninevites cry out to God. In all three cases, God is quick to respond.

Prayer is an odd topic. Most everyone would agree that it’s a necessary part of a healthy life in God. Yet so many people feel inadequate when it comes to prayer. We’re not good at prayer, we say. There’s a long list of reasons that keep us from praying, and because of that, the topic of prayer can easily leave people feeling guilty, shamed, and inferior. We’re tempted to think that the solution to the dilemma of prayer in our lives is simply to try harder—praying more and with more passion. Yet despite our best efforts, we often find ourselves back at square one.

Questions to Discuss

- What kinds of things keep you from praying?
- How have you been disappointed by prayer in your life?

What we need is an entirely new way of thinking about prayer, and one of the more shocking pieces of the story of Jonah is that God uses a man who blatantly refuses to pray to teach us one of the most poignant lessons on prayer in all the Scriptures.

Surprisingly, hardly any of the words in Jonah's prayer are original. Instead, he borrows virtually phrase or idea straight out of the Psalms [3, 5, 18, 30, 42, 69, 120, and 139]. For as long as the Psalms have been around, people of faith have used them to learn how to pray, and it's simple enough to understand why: there are moments in our lives when we simply don't know what to say to God—moments when we're so angry, so confused, or so flat out uninspired that we can't choke out even the simplest prayer. In such moments, the Psalms become words of life.

When you can't find your own words, borrow someone else's.
When you can't find your own hope, borrow someone else's.

Time and time again, people find themselves staring at the songs that are sung on Sundays, unable to sing the words. The fact of the matter is that there are moments when our heart does not choose to say, "Lord, blessed be your name." And in those moments, it's the community around us, singing "My heart will choose to say, Lord, blessed be your name" that gives us the courage and the faith to keep on trusting. Praying borrowed words has a way of guiding us into the presence of God in those moments when we can't seem to find the way ourselves.

But there is more.

One of the great mysteries of the Christian story is that words have a way of becoming flesh. In Hebrew, *davar* means "word", but it also means "event". Words don't simply convey ideas. They also make things happen, just as God's speaking in Genesis 1 made creation happen. They have the capacity to get loose in a person and rattle around inside them for weeks on end, sometimes for a lifetime. These are the kinds of words that don't let you alone—they linger, they nag at you until you change. They literally become flesh. So Jonah, with his back against an intestinal wall, recalls the Psalms and weaves these borrowed words into a prayer.

Questions to Discuss

- What are some words that you have found yourself coming back to again and again in your life? How have those words helped shape you?
- When in your life have you not known what to say to God?

There are basically two kinds of Psalms: Psalms of lament and Psalms of thanksgiving. Everything about Jonah's situation points to lament. He's angry. He's on the verge of death. But Jonah, remembering the Psalms, prays a prayer of thanksgiving. It's an odd choice.

A similar thing occurs in the book of Job. In one twenty-four hour period Job loses everything: his vast wealth gets stolen by thieves, all of his servants are killed—except for the few who live to tell him what happened—and every last one of his children is killed in a freak windstorm. It is immediate and overwhelming loss, and Job's response is not what you would expect.

“At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised .’” [Job 1.20-21]

Both Jonah’s prayer and Job’s worship are so counter-intuitive, unexpected. Who gets swallowed by a fish and prays a prayer of thanksgiving? Who loses everything and falls to the ground in worship?

In the midst of overwhelming sadness and hopelessness, Jonah reaches into the rich history of prayer and prays words of hope and trust. This prayer might be the greatest truth that gets revealed by Jonah’s life:

Prayer helps us live into truths that we sometimes don’t feel or can’t see. The truth that, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary: God is in control. God can be trusted. God hears the prayers that rise up to him out of the depths; they come up before his face, and he is concerned.

In our moments of sadness, confusion, and anxiety, praying Psalms of thanksgiving helps us move beyond our helplessness into the realm of God’s helpfulness. They move us out of our own smallness and into God’s bigness. Whatever our circumstance, the Psalms show us the way when we can’t find it on our own.

There is only one problem. Look at Jonah’s prayer again. Twice he speaks about God’s holy temple; then he commits to offering sacrifices to God, in Jerusalem, in Israel. He just wants to go home. Jonah never says anything about Nineveh or his running. He doesn’t apologize. He doesn’t repent. He doesn’t say he’ll go to Nineveh. And judging from what we’ve seen of him so far, his omission is suspicious.

So which is it?

Are his words sincere? Is he a changed man?

Or is he simply saying all the right things?

Or, as is so often the case, is it a little of both at the same time?

Maybe one of the most precious gifts of the story of Jonah is that God so often works in the world through people who are a curious mixture of dignity and depravity, sincerity and selfishness. Either way, his prayer comes up before God, and God commands the fish, and it vomits Jonah onto the dry land.

Questions to Discuss

- Read Psalm 138 [a Psalm of thanksgiving] out loud together. As you listen to the words, pay attention to the phrases that catch your attention. What in the Psalm moves you? What in the Psalm did you need to hear right now in your life?
- Now read Psalm 13 [a Psalm of lament] out loud, and pay attention to the phrases that catch your attention. What in the Psalm moves you? What in the Psalm did you need to hear in your life right now?
- In what ways has prayer helped you find hope in the midst of hopelessness?

Week Four | Jonah 3.1-10

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

[Read the following either out loud or silently and discuss the questions as a group.]

The Bible doesn’t say anything about Jonah’s long walk from the Mediterranean coast to Nineveh, only that the fish vomits him onto the dry land, and that he goes to Nineveh. Three days in the belly of the fish and a long walk is a lot of time to think.

What does Jonah think about as he makes the long trek? Is he so grateful to be alive that every step felt like a gift? Or does he stew over his conviction that Nineveh doesn’t deserve so much as a second thought from God, let alone a second chance?

The Bible doesn’t say. It simply says that this time, he went.

One thing is clear: Jonah despises Nineveh, and maybe for good reason. It turns out that Nineveh isn’t the only city in the Scriptures whose wickedness was so great that it caught God’s attention. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was so grievous that God decided to “go and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.” We understand from the Bible that things in Sodom and Gomorrah were really bad, and because Nineveh’s wickedness comes up before God in the same way, things in Nineveh must have been really bad too.

And things in Nineveh were bad. So bad that the prophet Nahum spoke of it: “The city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots! Charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses—all because of the wanton lust of a prostitute, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft.” [Nahum 3.1-4]

Who can blame Jonah for not wanting to go?

It’s easy for us to focus so much on the fact that Jonah is finally on the same page as God that we forget

just how bad things are in Nineveh. You could mistake Nahum’s description of Nineveh for the atrocities in present-day Congo: forced labor, systematic rape, and human trafficking. And it’s not about personal sin—if you read to the end of Jonah chapter 4, God mentions the animals of Nineveh. It’s a strange detail and a sad one because sin always extends beyond us to the people and things around us, even creation. It always has implications for others.

Questions to Discuss

- Does everyone deserve a second chance?
- How would you feel if you were Jonah, making your way into a city of depravity?
- In what ways have you been impacted by someone else’s sin?
- When have you seen your own sin have consequences for other people?

Whether Jonah learned to share God’s concern for Nineveh or just went out of obligation, the miracle is that he goes at all. He walks into the heart of darkness and begins making his way up and down the city streets proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”

In Hebrew, the number 40 is symbolic of an extended period of time. The great flood of Genesis lasted 40 days, the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness lasted 40 days. God is giving the Ninevites an extended period of time before overturning the city.

It’s a warning.

Word of Jonah’s warning spreads through the city. The news even makes its way to the king, who, upon hearing it, does something totally unexpected and unbecoming of a king: he gets off his throne, takes off his royal robes, puts on sackcloth, covers himself in ashes and sits low in the dust. He sends a royal decree throughout the city declaring that everyone fast and wear sackcloth—even the animals.

Nineveh’s response to God is an example of true repentance. Verse 10 says that “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.”

God’s compassion in the story of Jonah is not random. It’s aroused by the repentance of the sailors and the Ninevites. It triggers something in God that he can’t resist. God acts when people repent.

Repentance was at the heart of everything Jesus did. Everywhere he went, he preached “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” [Matthew 4.17]. And it was repentance that Jesus was talking about when he made reference to Jonah in Matthew 12. In that passage, some Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus to give them a sign. Jesus responded by saying, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.” [Matthew 12.39-41]

The pagan sailors and the bloodthirsty Ninevites repented, but as we'll see, Jonah, a Hebrew prophet, a leader, never seems to come around. He is hard-hearted and stubborn to the very end. And when Jesus, the Son of God, comes to earth, it's the leaders of the faith, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who refuse to accept his message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Questions to Discuss

- Why do you think it was so hard for Jonah and the Pharisees and teachers of the law to accept God's invitation to repent?
- Why do you think it can be so hard to repent?

The Ninevites "turned from their evil ways." The Hebrew word for "turn" is the word *shuv*. It means "to turn", but it also means "to return". Repentance—true, life altering repentance—is about more than just dying to sin. It's also about returning to the kind of life we were created for. Repentance is about stopping and going, dying and living, giving up and taking on. It is surrender and liberation all at once.

Both the story of Jonah and the life and ministry of Jesus are centered on the powerful act of repentance. They are an invitation to turn from sin and return to the life that God created us for.

What are the habits, patterns, behaviors, and ways of thinking, speaking, and living that we need to leave behind? Because God created us for so much more. But we don't just leave things behind, we replace them with new habits, patterns, behaviors, and ways of thinking, speaking, and living.

We replace death with life.

We exchange hearts of stone for hearts of flesh.

We turn and we return.

One of the most powerful images of repentance in this chapter of Jonah is the king of Nineveh getting off his throne. It's an acknowledgment that he's not in control, that there is Someone else who belongs in that seat. Repentance is a way of getting off the throne of our own lives, of stepping down and confessing that we are not capable of living the redeemed kind of life God created us for when we try to do it under our own power.

God is just waiting for people to turn from their sin and return to him. The question is, "How will we respond?" Will we respond like the sailors and the Ninevites or like Jonah? Will we respond like the sinners and tax collectors of Jesus' day or like the Pharisees and teachers of the law?

Questions to Discuss

- What new habits, patterns, behaviors, and ways of thinking, speaking, and living do you want in your life?
- What habits, patterns, behaviors, and ways of thinking, speaking, and living do you want to leave behind?

Week Five | Jonah 4.1-11

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

But the LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a gourd vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the vine?”

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

[Read the following either out loud or silently and discuss the questions as a group.]

Jonah is past frustrated. He is beyond upset. He is angry. So angry that for the second time in this story he would rather just die.

Jonah says one of the reasons he is angry is because God is “a God who relents from sending calamity”. The word calamity means great loss or lasting distress, or maybe we could just say lasting tragedy. When we think of lasting tragedy, it’s easy to remember the people of Haiti, hit with an earthquake that left thousands of men, women, and children dead and thousands more without food, water, or a place to sleep. An entire city in utter distress for many years to come and with very little hope to cling to.

This is calamity. And this is what Jonah hopes for the people of Nineveh? I think it is safe to assume that the roots of Jonah’s anger run very deep. This kind of anger isn’t built overnight.

In fact the Hebrew word for anger is the word *chara*. Not only does it mean anger but it also means, “to burn”. Jonah’s anger is a seething, bubbling kind of rage just below the surface. It’s the kind of anger that has been around for a long time and could explode through the surface at any moment. And it finally does.

This is a man—who claims to speak for God—and he is utterly enraged that God has shown grace and mercy to a city of people. It doesn’t match up. You would think that a person who speaks for God would have an idea of how God works. But that is the problem. Jonah responds to God saying, “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” Jonah knows how God works, and he doesn’t like it.

Like many of us, Jonah is not getting his way. He doesn’t want “Gracious, Compassionate God” he wants “Angry, Bring the Calamity God”. He wants his idea of justice to be served. And it’s not happening.

Jonah and Nineveh are more alike than Jonah wants to admit. Jonah, in the belly of the fish, cries out for God's grace and mercy, and God delivers him. Nineveh cries the same cry to the same God and God responds in the same way. Grace. Jonah and Nineveh are in need of the same thing from the same God.

But Jonah can't accept that he *is* his enemy, and his enemy is him. So he finds himself in a place he is familiar with, feeling that same itch to get away—wanting to escape it all. Jonah wants to die, which is really just another form of escape. In the same way that Jonah ran to Tarshish, he is running still.

When we begin to take a long hard look inside ourselves for the root of our anger we start to see things we may or may not like; things like fear and self-hatred. Jonah is not running from God; he is running from himself. And no matter how far he runs, he will always have to keep running.

Maybe like Jonah, you're angry. Maybe you're on the run. And the more you run the more you distance yourself from the grace that is waiting. It is time to stop running.

Questions to Discuss

- What things have you seen in others that made you angry only to later find those same things in yourself?
- If you look just behind or underneath your anger, what's the real source of it?
- Where or to whom in your life have you been showing anger where instead you should be extending grace?

Jonah is angry at God and angry about Nineveh. These folks have murdered and killed. They've cracked whips on the backs of slave laborers. And Jonah still expects them to earn their share of calamity. So he leaves the city and finds a place to sit and watch what will happen next. He fully believes that Nineveh will backslide, even hopes they will. Jonah sits down because he wants a front row seat to watch God wipe these people off the map. He is sitting and waiting, watching for his sweet justice to finally come.

But while he waits it becomes extremely hot and God causes a plant to grow behind him to give him the shade he needs.

Now if you are like me you are reading that part of the story saying, Wait, you gave him shade? Jonah finds a seat and is waiting to throw God's actions back in his face and say Ha! I told you so, I told you that you were wrong—and God makes him more comfortable? Jonah cannot wait to prove God wrong and God's response is, need an umbrella? Sure you're comfy? Can I get you anything?

Jonah is still waiting to enjoy his justice and God responds with grace and mercy. The irony here is that God is showing Jonah grace while Jonah sits and hopes for God's grace to fall apart for Nineveh. As if it is somehow good enough for him, but not for them.

And I think that word is the key here: "them". Those people, that group, them. The word "them" often carries with it an idea of separation. There is "us" and then there is "them". And often when "them" is used to describe our enemies, they get stripped of their humanity. They begin to represent something that is less than human. Something we can hate and not feel bad about because it is justified.

God says to Jonah “Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left.” What an odd way to describe people. But this was actually a common Hebrew way of referring to children or helpless people who don’t know any better. God is saying to Jonah, “There are 120,000 helpless people in that city, should I not care for them?”

God reminds Jonah that his enemies are human. But Jonah is hoping for revenge.

Questions to Discuss

- When is a time that you have viewed someone as less than human?
- When was a time that you wanted revenge? Did you get it? If so, how did it make you feel?

The story of Jonah is ultimately about God and what he is like. What his desires for the world are. It’s a story that puts Jonah’s desire alongside God’s desire and builds to a question: Will God’s desires become Jonah’s desires? Will God’s hope for the world become Jonah’s heart for the world?

God is a “gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” This phrase is repeated all over the Old Testament. Jonah’s hope for Nineveh’s misfortune is contrasted with this God. The one who speaks on behalf of God is not reflecting the same desires as God. Jonah has a different hope. What Jonah wants is not what God wants.

Do we want the same things that God wants?

Great stories tend to leave us hanging. They don’t resolve. We’re left sitting in the tension wondering what happened. Jesus’ story of the prodigal son ends this way. In the final scene, the father is pleading with his older son to come join the party that is being thrown for his younger brother. But the story ends before the older son makes a choice, and we’re left wondering, Does he go into the party? Or does he sit outside and sulk?

The book of Jonah ends like this too, which is a clever way of jolting us out of the story and into our own lives. The question is not so much, Will Jonah come around? as it is, *Will I come around?* The question is not, Will the older brother ever join the party? The question is, *Will I join the party?* The simple storyline of Jonah is this: God has a dream for the world. Jonah has a dream for the world. Those dreams are very different. God is compassionate. Jonah is angry. God invites Jonah to share his dream for the world, to exchange his anger for compassion. Will he? God extends that same invitation to us—to share his dreams for the world, to exchange our anger for compassion, grace, and mercy. *Will we?*

Questions to Discuss

- What are a couple of things you can do personally to align your dream for the world closer to God’s dream for the world?
- What are a couple of things your group can do together to align your dreams for the world closer to God’s dream for the world?