

JONAH

Can you handle God's mercy?

Sunbridge Road Mission

Summer 2020 Bible Studies

“You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

Jonah 4:2

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A. Introduction

What is Jonah all about?

The Book of Jonah is all about God's mercy. God's mercy to Jonah in his rebellion, and God's mercy to Nineveh and the nations in their wickedness. The story reveals that God's mercy isn't always comfortable, and as we see in Jonah's reaction, we don't always like the implications. God's mercy is boundless. It isn't just limited to us and people like us, but extends to people we might not expect. The book of Jonah helps us to reflect on whether we've responded to God's mercy in repentance, but also whether our heart is aligned with God's heart in merciful concern for those who are lost.

When and where did it take place?

We are told in 2 Kings 14:23-28 that Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II who ruled in Israel from 782 to 753 B.C. This was a prosperous time for Israel because the Assyrians were preoccupied elsewhere in the empire, allowing Jeroboam to capture large parts of Syria and expand Israel's borders.

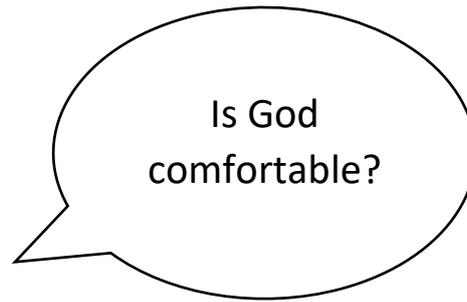
This map shows Israel's capital Samaria, the nearby port of Joppa, the likely direction of Tarshish, and the city of Nineveh at the heart of the Assyrian empire. These are all significant locations within the book of Jonah.



(ESV Study Bible, Crossway)

Warm up (large group or pairs)...

Discuss the following question:



Read: Jonah 1

Unpack...

Why is God asking Jonah to go to Nineveh? [1:1-2]

What is surprising about Jonah's response? [1:3]

By the way...

Nineveh was at the heart of the Assyrian empire, which was the regional superpower of the day. Assyria was one of the most cruel and violent empires of the ancient world. They were known for torturing, dismembering, and decapitating their enemies which you can still see portrayed in the large stone panels in the British museum. One of their practices was to force friends and family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones lifted up on poles. You can see why Jonah was wary of taking God's message to them, and why he wanted to see them experience God's judgement rather than his mercy.

Discuss (pairs or small groups)...

In the very first verse we are introduced to the two main characters in the book – the LORD and Jonah. What do we learn about them in this chapter?

Unpack...

Look at the difference between how Jonah and the sailors respond. How do the pagan sailors show Jonah up? [4-16]

What is ironic about what Jonah says in verse 9?

- In terms of who he is trying to flee from
- In terms of the mission he is trying to avoid

It is futile to try and run away from the God who rules over the whole earth.

How do we see God's sovereign control in these verses?

So what...

When we look at Jonah it is easy to see how foolish he is in running from God and trying to resist his call, and yet we so easily do the same:

- Share some examples of where we've tried to flee from God and the claim of his word on our lives.

- What parts of God's character and his word do we not really like and try to push away?

- How is it possible like Jonah to know all the right answers but resist God's call upon our lives?

Unpack...

Jonah seems to think that the God of the Bible is just a god for Israel. How is that challenged in this chapter? [2, 9, 14-16]

What sign do we get right at the end of the chapter that God will be merciful to Jonah even in his disobedience?

By the way...

Mercy describes the showing of kindness or compassion when one has every right to bring judgement or punishment.

So what...

In what ways do we think God is for certain kinds of people and not others?

Even after all his disobedience and unfaithfulness God is merciful to Jonah as he sinks to the bottom of the sea. How is this an encouragement to us when we've run from God, or feel as if we've gone too far for God to want us back?

Pause...

Write down a few things to chew over later. What have you learnt? How has God spoken to you?

Pray...

Respond to God in light of what he has shown you in his word.

Jonah 2

Crying out for mercy from the depths

Warm up (large group or pairs)...

What do you think stops people turning to God for help?

So far...

Where did we leave Jonah at the end of chapter 1, and how did he end up there?

Read: Jonah 2

Discuss (pairs or small groups)...

Look at the language and imagery Jonah uses in these verses. What experience is Jonah describing?

Unpack...

In chapter 1, Jonah was stubbornly refusing to come to God in prayer, even when the pagan sailors around him were doing so. Yet here in verse 2 Jonah recounts that he called out to the LORD. Why do you think things have changed?

So what...

Why do you think it sometimes takes us to be broken before we will cry out to God for help?

How has this been your experience?

Unpack...

In verse 9 Jonah declares that 'Salvation comes from the LORD'. How do we see this truth play out in these events?

'Salvation comes from the LORD' is an affirmation of grace. It acknowledges that salvation is entirely a gift from God. We neither deserve it nor contribute towards it. It is all God's doing.

- How does Jonah grasp grace in this chapter?

- What signs are there in his prayer that he still hasn't fully got it?

How is Jonah's drowning and rescue a good picture of God's salvation today?

Read: Matthew 12:38-41

Unpack...

Some people suggest that we should read the book of Jonah as a fable (fictional story with a meaning) rather than a historical reality.

- Which part of the story do you think people struggle with?

- How does Jesus' comment on Jonah in Matthew 12 help us think about this?

- Do you think it matters? Why? Why not?

The great fish was God's provision to rescue Jonah from certain destruction. Based on Jesus' comparison in Matthew 12 what is God's provision to rescue us from the destruction we face because of our disobedience?

So what...

If we are Christians, it is only because we have received God's mercy. Like Jonah we are people who were deservedly heading for destruction because of our disobedience, but God has rescued us. Just like Jonah, however, it is so easy for us to become presumptive and arrogant – thinking that somehow we deserved God's rescue.

What difference will this make to the way we interact with those around us – particularly those who aren't Christians?

Pause...

Write down a few things to chew over later. What have you learnt? How has God spoken to you?

Pray...

Respond to God in light of what he has shown you in his word.

Jonah 3

The wicked repent and God relents

Warm up (large group or pairs)...

Who are the people you could never imagine becoming Christians?

Read: Jonah 3

Unpack...

Hopefully the first two verses seem familiar. Where have we seen them before?

After all Jonah's disobedience God re-commissions him to go to Nineveh. What does that teach us about God's character? [1-2]

So what...

Clearly God is able to use flawed and failed instruments to do his work – why is that good news for us?

Unpack...

How is Jonah's response different this time? [3-4]

What is the essence of Jonah's message to Nineveh? [4]

What is the essence of the Ninevites response? [5]

Discuss (pairs or small groups)...

To repent is to change direction. To turn around. To turn away from going our own way, and to turn back to God and his way. What evidence is there in Nineveh of true repentance? [5-9]

Unpack...

Why is the response of Nineveh so surprising?

What does God's response show us about his character? [10]

So what...

Read: Matthew 12:38-41

How is Nineveh's response a warning to us? [41]

What will true repentance look like in our lives?

We started by thinking about people we could never imagine becoming Christians – people who seem beyond God's reach. How does the response of Nineveh challenge this?

Can you think of any other examples of people you'd never have expected to respond in repentance to the message of the gospel?

Why is it always worth warning people about the judgement of God?

How might this change the way we relate to those around us?

Pause...

Write down a few things to chew over later. What have you learnt? How has God spoken to you?

Pray...

You could ask God for opportunities to proclaim the gospel to people around you are living in rebellion against God – even those who seem beyond his reach. Pray that people might believe God, and respond in true repentance.

Jonah 4

The heart issue: Can you handle God's mercy?

So far (large group or pairs)...

What has God been teaching us through the book of Jonah so far?

God has just relented from destroying Nineveh because of their repentance. In this chapter we see the response of the two main characters, and the difference between God's heart and Jonah's heart is now clearly displayed for us to see.

Read: Jonah 4

Unpack...

What is Jonah so upset about? [1-3]

What part of God's character does Jonah have an issue with? [2]

How does this help us understand why Jonah disobeyed God right at the beginning of the book? [2]

Jonah says things are so bad he wants to die. Why do you think he is so opposed to God's mercy upon Nineveh? [1-3]

So what...

It is very easy for the church to develop the same heart of selfish self-righteousness that Jonah has. We want God to bless us, and judge others.

How do we struggle with God blessing others, rather than us?

Who are the people we are hesitant to share God's mercy with?

What is the problem with the church keeping God to themselves?

Discuss (pairs or small groups)...

The LORD challenges Jonah's attitude in verse 4, and then tries to show him where he is going wrong. What is God teaching Jonah through the plant?
[5-11]

Unpack...

What do you think Jonah is waiting for as he sits down at the edge of the city?
[5]

How does the plant expose Jonah's heart in terms of what he loves, and what he gets angry about? [6-9]

If Jonah cares about this plant, why is it so much more fitting that God should care about Nineveh? [10-11]

What do these last verses reveal about God's heart? [10-11]

How do we see God's heart of compassion upon the lost in the Lord Jesus?

So what...

What stirs our hearts and gets us angry can be very revealing. Where are we in danger of caring more about our own comfort than the spiritual state of people around us?

How can we, like Jonah, be in danger of being insiders who know all the answers, but completely miss God's wonderful heart of mercy towards the lost?



Bradford is a city of about 350,000 people:

- How do we feel about the city around us?
- What might it look like to respond to Bradford with God's heart of compassion?

On the whole the UK is walking away from God and his ways. Does that bother us, and if so why?

- Is it because we are losing our influence and security?
(Jonah's heart of self-interest)
- Is it because millions of people who have been made in God's image do not know their right hand from their left?
(God's heart of compassion)

Discuss (pairs or small groups)...

So often like Jonah our hearts are marked by self-interest rather than by mercy and compassion. We want God to have mercy on us but not on them!

What might it look like for your life to be marked by God's heart of compassion towards the lost?

Pause...

Write down a few things to chew over later. What have you learnt? How has God spoken to you?

Pray...

Respond to God in light of what he has shown you in his word.