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# JONAH

AND THE GOD OF  
SECOND CHANCES

SMALL GROUP LESSONS

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION | Introduction to Jonah.....2**

**LESSON 1 | Operation Nineveh Jonah.....4**

**LESSON 2 | Swallowed by Mercy..... 10**

**LESSON 3 | Praying for Salvation Below Sea Level ..... 15**

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Studies were compiled and questions were written by the VBC Pastoral Team.

# INTRODUCTION TO JONAH

The story of Jonah has captured imaginations for generations. It's a bedtime favorite, with its dramatic account of a prophet swallowed up by a great fish as he flees God's call for him to proclaim God's message to the wicked city of Nineveh. But as we'll learn, this story is about so much more than a great fish and a rogue prophet.

Packed away into this short book of the Bible we are given a glimpse into God's heart for the nations, His plan of redemption through the gospel of grace. We will learn how this story serves as a microcosm of the great narrative of Scripture, setting the stage and preparing the world for the coming of the Messiah. We will be forced to not only wrestle with the glorious truths of God's character and calling, but our response to it; learning that knowing and even experiencing the depths of God's grace does not mean we fully understand it.

God's grace and the call of repentance are not only for those who don't yet know the Lord, but even for those who have walked with Him and experienced it first hand. This is a book, not about a man and a fish, but about the God of second chances.

## Timeline



## Author and Date

Jonah prophesied during the peaceful and prosperous time of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–28), who ruled in Israel (the northern kingdom) from 782 to 753 B.C. This was a time when Assyria was not a threat to Israel.

## Overview

The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment on it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord's calling by sailing from the seaport of Joppa to Tarshish, which was probably on the shores of the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and traveled overland to Nineveh.

## Theme

The primary theme in Jonah is that God's compassion is boundless, not limited just to "us" (Jonah and the Israelites) but also available for "them" (the pagan sailors and the Ninevites).

## Key Themes

- I. God is in sovereign control over all events on the earth.
- II. God is determined to get his message to the nations.
- III. People need to repent from sin in general, and from self-centeredness and hypocrisy in particular.
- IV. God promises that he will forgive when people repent.



## Outline

The story of Jonah includes seven episodes, with the first three paralleled by the second three. The final episode stands alone as the climax of the story:

- A. Jonah's commissioning and flight (1:1–3)
- B. Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4–16)
- C. Jonah's grateful prayer (1:17–2:10)
- D. Jonah's recommissioning and compliance (3:1–3a)
- E. Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3b–10)
- F. Jonah's angry prayer (4:1–4)
- G. Jonah's lesson about compassion (4:5–11)

## The Setting of Jonah

c. 760 B.C.

Jonah prophesied during the prosperous time of King Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:23–28). During this time the Assyrians were occupied with matters elsewhere in the empire, allowing Jeroboam II to capture much of Syria for Israel. The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment upon it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord's calling by sailing to Tarshish, which was probably in the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh, at the heart of the Assyrian Empire.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-jonah/>



A lot of times it feels easier to do it myself. Whether it's teaching my kids how to help with chores, showing someone how to use a new tool, or delegating a project at work, sometimes it feels like involving others doesn't help, but makes things slower and messier.

I often find myself thinking how remarkable it is that God doesn't take that approach with us. If I feel that way with my own kids and other people in my own life, surely God must feel that way too, right? Of all people, He could accomplish His plans all on His own, far more efficiently and perfectly. Yet in His wisdom, He chooses to send and use us to proclaim His message and minister to people. We aren't the best representatives and at least for me, I feel like I get it wrong more than I get it right. We stumble over words and make decisions that are less than perfect. And other times, we are just flat out rebellious!

As we look at God's command for Jonah and Jonah's response, it can be easy to point out his shortcomings and failures. But I think we'll come to see that we are an awful lot more like this reluctant prophet than we'd probably like to admit.

## ICEBREAKER

**If you had to spend a week in a city you'd least want to visit, where would it be and why?**

## READ IT

**Read Jonah 1:1-3**

## GET IT

1. Where did God tell Jonah to go?
2. What was Jonah to do when he got there?
3. How did Jonah respond to the word of the LORD?
4. Where did Jonah go instead?

## LIVE IT

“It is one thing to know the doctrine of salvation by grace, and quite another to know the grace of the doctrine of salvation. This is the lesson of Jonah, the prophet who knew God’s grace but was challenged by God inwardly to embrace it. Sinclair Ferguson has expressed Jonah’s story in these terms: “It is really a book about . . . how one man came, through painful experience, to discover the true character of the God whom he had already served in the earlier years of his life. He was to find the doctrine about God (with which he had long been familiar) come alive in his experience.”

When most people think of Jonah, they think only of the famous fish that swallowed him. Their first question is, Did this really happen? Or, What kind of fish was it? But these questions are incidental to the book. Far more importantly, Jonah brings us face to face with such important issues as God’s grace for the wicked, God’s sovereignty over his servants, and the intense human struggle involved with forgiveness and repentance.”<sup>2</sup>

5. How would you describe the meaning behind the statement, “It is one thing to know the doctrine of salvation by grace, and quite another to know the grace of the doctrine of salvation”?

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<sup>2</sup> Phillips, Richard D.. Jonah & Micah (Reformed Expository Commentary) (pp. 3-4). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

6. Can you think of a time when a truth you'd known for years (like God's love, sovereignty, or forgiveness) suddenly became real through life experience?

When the word of the LORD came to Jonah, it wasn't vague or confusing. God told him exactly what to do: "*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it.*" God's Word is like that. It's specific, it's clear, and it carries the expectation of obedience.

While God may not send us to Nineveh, He still speaks with clarity. He's given us His Word in Scripture, which tells us who He is, what He desires, and how we are to live. He also gives us His Spirit, who helps us understand and apply His Word. **The challenge is often not that we don't know what God wants, but that we don't want to do what He says.**

7. What do you think it means that God speaks to us with clarity? Are there any ways that you feel God has not communicated clearly with us?

8. Why do you think it's often easier to claim "I don't know what God wants" than to admit "I don't want to do it"?

“Thus, by Jonah 1, the prophet has had some ministry success with the Lord and has walked with the Lord for a good portion of his life. He already knows the kindness of the Lord; he already knows His power to save, comfort, heal, and judge. He already understands that the Lord is Israel’s protector and strong tower, her King of Glory who is worthy to be praised.

Therefore, when the word of the Lord comes to Jonah, he is less like someone who does not want to answer the call to stand behind the pulpit and more like someone who does not want to talk to people in this evil generation about the goodness of our God. He is not the pastor only a few of us can identify with; he is the person who has experienced the grace of God but fails to tell others about it. All of us can—and must—relate to him. He is a rebel against the Lord’s word, which calls everyone to tell others about a great and loving King.”<sup>3</sup>

**9. What is something you’ve learned through your own experience with God that has solidified your confidence in who He is?**

**10. How can we guard our hearts so that our experience with God deepens our trust in Him rather than becoming an excuse to dismiss His commands?**

The first mention of Nineveh is in the Table of Nations, which describes the many cities Nimrod built in Assyria including “Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city” (Genesis 10:11–12). Nineveh was known for its great wealth, power, and prestige. The Assyrians were notorious for their cruelty and idolatry (Nahum 3:19). Their capital, Nineveh, contained many temples, including one to Ishtar, the Assyrian goddess that some scholars believe was the namesake of Nineveh.<sup>4</sup>

**11. Why do you think God cared about the evil being done in Nineveh?**

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<sup>3</sup> Redmond, Eric; Curtis, William; Fentress, Ken. Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (pp. 26–27). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/Nineveh-in-the-Bible.html>



12. Are there people or groups you find yourself reluctant to share your faith with, not because you think they wouldn't listen, but because deep down you don't want them to experience God's mercy?

Rather than embracing God's commission to go to Nineveh, Jonah sought to escape it. We're told in the text that Jonah "rose to flee... from the presence of the LORD".

We know the Psalmist declares in Psalm 139:7-10,

*Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me.*

13. Why do you think someone would try to flee from the presence of God?

14. Without just saying “sin”, what might cause you to run from something God is calling you to in your own life at are some personal skills and passions you feel God has given you and how have you seen those gifts affirmed by others in your life?

15. In what ways might we try to “run” from God today (not geographically, but spiritually or emotionally)?

16. What do you see Jonah 1:1–3 reveal about God, about Jonah, and about us?



Sometimes life throws us into a storm we didn't expect. It could be the storm of health issues, financial struggles, broken relationships, or deep personal failure. And while some storms come simply because we live in a fallen world, others like Jonah's, come because of our own disobedience. Jonah thought running from God meant running away from his own responsibilities and consequences. But instead, he found himself in a situation where his choices didn't just affect him, they endangered everyone around him. Still, even in the midst of his rebellion and chaos, God's mercy and sovereignty are on display. The storm, the sailors, and even the great fish all remind us that God is in control, pursuing his people even when they try to run.

## ICEBREAKER

**What's the worst storm, (literal or metaphorical,) you have ever been through in your life?**

## READ IT

**Read Jonah 1:4-17**

## GET IT

1. Who sent the storm that threatened the ship?
2. How did the sailors react when the storm hit?
3. What was Jonah doing while the storm raged?
4. How did Jonah explain the reason for the storm?
5. What happened after Jonah was thrown into the sea?

## LIVE IT

“The opening chapter of Jonah is set in the midst of an intense storm, a really intense storm. Modern meteorology has documented the development of tropical cyclones in the Mediterranean Sea, which is where this takes place. A violent tempest, we know from meteorological records, can reach an excess of ninety miles per hour – that is hurricane level, and even beyond that – and create surging waves as a result of those kinds of horrible, terrifying winds. And this is the kind of storm that one might assume was going on in Jonah’s story. But really it was something qualitatively different than that.”<sup>5</sup>

The storm wasn’t random – it was sent by God to get Jonah’s attention and redirect his course. While storms can feel like punishment, they are often expressions of God’s mercy and grace, designed to wake us up and bring us back to Him.

6. How do you see God’s grace and mercy even in sending a storm?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gty.org/sermons/80-393/jonah-the-worlds-greatest-fish-story>



**7. How have you seen God used hardship to draw you closer to Him or to redirect your path?**

Ironically, Jonah's disobedience became a platform for the sailors to hear about the one true God. Even as Jonah resisted the call to Nineveh, God used Jonah to display His power and sovereignty.

**8. What do you think the sailors learned about God through this storm?**

**9. How does it encourage (or challenge) you to realize that God can even use our failures as a testimony?**

**10. The sailors felt the consequences of Jonah's sin. How does this still happen in our lives? How does one individual's sin and its consequences impact the lives of others around them?**

Jonah set sail to cruise away from God's goal for his life. I imagine him standing on the upper deck while waving goodbye to all his responsibilities. As the land disappears over the horizon, so do all his perceived problems. He takes a deep breath of salty air, sighs in relief, stretches out his arms, and snuggles up for a much-needed nap. As he's drifting off into a deep sleep, the boat drifts into a severe storm. Waves toss the little boat back and forth like a ping-pong ball getting paddled across a table. This storm is so strong that all the men aboard assume it has to be a Divine delay. They shake Jonah awake and ask, "What on earth did you do, dude? You show up, and now we are about to get swallowed up by the sea."

Jonah knows that this storm is proof of God's pursuit, so he hatches a peculiar plan. "Just throw me overboard," he announces. Let that sink in (pun intended). Jonah basically tells these guys that they should sacrifice him. Even a skilled sailor would only survive seconds in rough water like this. Naturally, the crew refuses, saying, "There has to be another way." Seriousness sweeps over his face as the rebellious prophet assures that this is the only path to protection for them. Ironically, this is the first time Jonah starts moving towards God's calling.

Sometimes, obedience after resistance is far more difficult. If he had just obeyed originally, things would have looked drastically different. There'd have been no storm. There'd have been no plunge into water. He'd just have to walk on a paved path for a couple of days.

God used a storm to stop Jonah. Jonah was delaying God's call, so God chose to intervene. Here is a critical question. What are you supposed to do that you're delaying? Maybe you need to reconnect with a friend. Maybe you need to start being more generous. Maybe you need to initiate forgiveness with someone. Maybe you need to stop returning over and over again to the same sin. Whatever it is, don't delay it any longer. God may send a storm to wake you up. Like Jonah, some of us are sleeping. We are sleeping on our potential. We are sleeping on our calling. God wants to wake us up from our slumber, and He may use a storm to do it.<sup>6</sup>

**11. Jonah surrenders and tells the sailors to throw him overboard. In what ways does Jonah's surrender foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ?**

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<sup>6</sup> Garrel, Jackson. Circles Discussion Guide Jonah, 2020.

**12. What does it look like for us to surrender our will to God in the midst of our storms?**

**13. God's prophet to the pagans is in the sea, and the pagans on the boat have a revival! (v.16) What does this show us about how we should think about those saved and unsaved? What is the difference between God's people and pagans?**

The passage ends not with Jonah's destruction, but with God's provision - a great fish swallows him alive. While it may not have been the rescue Jonah would have chosen, it was God's way of saving him.

**14. How does the fish reveal God's mercy toward His rebellious prophet? Does it display God's mercy toward anyone else in the story?**



“Salvation belongs to the LORD!” God’s dramatic intervention in the life of Jonah is full of hope—not only for those who seek God, but also for those who, like Jonah, have determined to shut him out. Many people believe God opens the door of salvation and then stands back, leaving it up to us to decide if we want to come in. But if God made salvation possible and then stepped back, refusing to interfere with our choice, then the entire life of believers would be about us—our believing, our serving, our following, and our choices to live a good life. In the case of Jonah, imprisoned in the whale’s belly, God was claiming someone who was quite incapable of performing any redeeming work to compensate for his sin. God was not relying on Jonah to save Jonah. The message remains the same for each of us today: if you have trusted God for salvation, he has done more than simply make salvation possible; he has actually saved you.

Consider what lies behind our faith. Even before the creation of the world, we were “on God’s horizon.” God set his love on us and formed his plans for us even before we were born (Ps. 139:16; Eph. 1:4–5). When Jesus came into the world, he came to save real people with real names and faces. If we are in Christ, we are among them. The sins he carried to the cross were our sins. The hell he endured was our hell. God did all this for us before we were born, but it didn’t end there. He brought salvation to us, opening our eyes to see our sin, and drawing our hearts to find hope in the Savior.

Each Christian has a unique story of how this took place. The times, the places, and the people involved vary, but behind each story, however simple, is the same amazing miracle of God’s grace (Eph. 2:8–9). Once you see that God has come after you and has laid hold of you, it will open up a new sense of worship and wonder, a new awareness of his love, and a new confidence in what God can do for others.<sup>7</sup>

## ICEBREAKER

**What’s the scariest moment you’ve ever experienced by, on, or in a body of water? What made it scary?**

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<sup>7</sup> ESV Gospel Transformation Study Bible: Christ in All of Scripture, Grace for All of Life: English Standard Version. Crossway, 2019.



## READ IT

Read Jonah 2:1-9

## GET IT

1. From what specific location did Jonah pray to the Lord?
2. Who does Jonah state cast him into the deep?
3. What did Jonah say he was driven away from?
4. What did Jonah remember when his life was fainting away, and what action did he take as a result?
5. What belongs to the Lord, according to Jonah?

## LIVE IT

### *Jonah's Prayer is Like a Psalm of Thanksgiving*

The story now turns to Jonah's prayer, which is filled with biblical language, especially that of the Psalms. In fact, his prayer is most similar to a number of psalms usually considered "psalms of thanksgiving" (Psalms 18 [=2 Samuel 22]; 30; 32; 34; 66; 92; 116; 118; 138; cf. 1 Sam. 2:1-10; Isa. 38:9-20), which are characterized by thankfulness to the Lord for his protection and deliverance (cf. Jonah 2:2, 6b, 9). Such psalms usually recount the psalmist's cry for help (cf. vv. 2b, 7) and the trouble from which the Lord has delivered the psalmist (cf. vv. 2b-6a); sometimes they highlight the contrast between the righteous and the wicked (cf. vv. 8-9). For a man who was rescued from certain death because of the Lord's help, this was the perfect type of prayer to pray—and he prays it while still in the fish's belly! His trial is not yet over, but he has seen the Lord begin to work and has faith that the Lord will deliver him completely.<sup>8</sup>

6. Who is the person you know who seems to have the most gratitude? How can you tell they are thankful?

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<sup>8</sup> Sklar, Jay. *ESV Expository Commentary: Daniel-Malachi*. Crossway. 2018.

7. What place should prayers of thanksgiving have in the life of a believer? Write down another Bible verse that supports your answer.
8. What's the biggest distress (v. 2) you've experienced this last year? How did you experience gratitude for anything during that challenge?
9. How is God calling you to a greater pattern of gratitude, even in the midst of suffering or despair? What is one thing you can thank God for every day this week?

### ***Jonah's Prayer Teaches Us How to Respond to a Second Chance from God***

Jonah then does what sometimes happens in prayers of thanksgiving: he describes his own hope and faith in the Lord and contrasts himself with those who put their faith and hope in other things (vv. 8–9; cf. Pss. 32:10; 34:15–22; 92:5–15). Such a contrast emphasizes that the Lord does indeed help those who look to him in obedient faith, and he encourages those in the midst of trial to stay true to the Lord instead of looking elsewhere for salvation. In this context, those who do not hope in the Lord “pay regard to vain idols” (Jonah 2:8a). The words “vain idols” could be translated more woodenly as “worthless things of fleeting vapors,” emphasizing that placing hope in such things is utterly useless; it is like trying to get out of a hole by grabbing onto the wind. Only the Lord can save.<sup>9</sup>

**10. Thinking of a time you received a second chance in a relationship, at work, or on another team, what did you learn from that experience?**

**11. What do you see in Jonah's prayer that a Christian today should imitate in our response to a second chance from God?**

**12. Jonah mentions God's holy temple twice. What does each verse show us about what's happening in Jonah's heart?**

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

- 13. What are three “vain idols” you can think of that our world offers us for comfort in our times of distress? Write one reason for each item that they fail to truly save you.**

***Jonah’s Prayer Points to Salvation through Jesus Alone***

My Christian brother or sister, as you read about Jonah, consider the great deliverance God has worked in your life. Perhaps God saved you in the last few months or years, and in the process he delivered you from difficulties and trials, sinful addictions and degrading passions. Your experience has been like walking from the dark, stormy night into the broad, cloudless sunshine of morning. Or perhaps you came to Christ as a child, years ago. Either way, all of us as Christians share in Christ’s deliverance from God’s just punishment of our sins—a punishment far worse than anything a raging ocean can deal out. So praise God for the way he saved you! When you sing spiritual songs and hymns about the great salvation that God has wrought in your life, sing with your whole heart! Realize that you were heading in the wrong direction, just like Jonah. Realize that you were as helpless as a man among raging waves. Yet God saved you! Give praise to God for this because there is no greater news that you can hear.<sup>10</sup>

- 14. How does remembering that you were “as helpless as a man among raging waves” fuel a spirit of gratitude and praise?**

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<sup>10</sup> Dever, Mark. *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made*. Crossway. 2006.



15. What parallels are there between Jonah's story and the story of Jesus? What contrasts are there? (Hint: See Luke 11:30, Matthew 12:40-44, and Philippians 2:8)
16. Now that you've studied Jonah's prayer, how would you encourage a friend who is experiencing a season of deep "distress"?