

life group study guide

March 9, 2014



What in the World is God Doing? – An Overview of Jonah

Text: Jonah 1-4; Luke 15, but specifically be sure to read 1:1-2, 11-17; 3:3-5, 10; 4:11; and Luke 15:1-10.

Introduction

When most of us think of Jonah, we invariably connect him with the whale (or fish) that swallowed him for three days. Many of us can probably sing along with our kids a Bible school song such as: “*Who did, who did, who did, who did; who did swallow Jon-Jon-Jonah . . . ?*”

That’s okay, but it misses the big picture and the real message of the book. As the *NLT Study Bible* says: “. . . the book’s main purpose is not to teach us about him [Jonah] but to teach us about God . . . that though He is a God who will pour out His wrath on the wicked, He is also One who eagerly pours out His mercy on those who repent – *including those we would too quickly deem to be beyond mercy.*”

Ouch. That last line stings a bit because I have so often acted as judge and “deemed” some people as being beyond mercy.

- Do you ever “deem” some people as maybe being beyond God’s mercy? What people? Murderers? Rapists? Child molesters? Democrats? (just a little fun!), or whole classes of people perhaps? The very rich? Muslims?
- Does the Church (universal) and/or Kingsway ever do the same? Given the mercy that most of us acknowledge God has shown us, why is this so?
- Is it possible that Christians and the Church sometimes “deem” people to be beyond mercy because we don’t want any responsibility for reaching out to them? Are some people not included in the “all nations” of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20)?

Theme, Purpose, and Structure (Acknowledgement to the *ESV Study Bible*)

The primary theme of Jonah is that God is a God of infinite compassion, not only for “us” (Israel, Jonah, we Christians today) but also for “them” (heathen sailors, Ninevites, the “world”), and that He still seeks to pour out His mercy on both. Other themes that I hope you notice are:

- God’s sovereignty over this world, despite all the contrary evidence.
- God’s plan and determination to reach “the nations.”
- The absolute need for repentance from all sin.
- God’s hatred for hypocrisy and self-centeredness.
- That God can “change His mind” when He sees repentance. What does that mean for our prayers?

Its main purpose is to exhort us to think about the God of amazing grace, to compare our own character with His, and then to encourage us to imitate His compassion. Do we reflect that compassion? If not, what do we do about it?

The book of Jonah is amazing. The *ESV Study Bible* calls it a “literary masterpiece.” It uses structure, humor, satire, hyperbole, irony, and other devices to make its points. It is composed

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of 7 well-crafted sections. The second three sections parallel the first three and lead up to the climactic question of the book, “Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?”

Although our study today will be on just a few verses, I encourage you to examine the book more closely in the days ahead to better appreciate it.

Note the parallels in sections 1-4, 2-5, and 3-6.

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| 1. Jonah is called and rebels.
1:1-3 | 4. Jonah called again and obeys.
3:1-3 |
| 2. Jonah “preaches” to the sailors.
1:4-17 | 5. Jonah preaches to the Ninevites.
3:3-10 |
| 3. Jonah’s prayer of thanks.
2:1-10 | 6. Jonah’s prayer of anger.
4:1-4 |
| | 7. God teaches Jonah about His mercy.
4:5-11 |

Study: 1:1-2, 11-17; 3:3-5, 10; 4:11.

1. The mission of God and His people – 1:1-2. God tells Jonah to “announce my judgment against” Nineveh (literally “to call out against it”) because of its wickedness. Nineveh was a “great city” and an important part of the Assyrian Empire. But they were also Gentiles, pagans, enemies of Israel (although not an immediate threat). God says that its “evil has come up before me” (ESV). What was their evil? At least violence (3:8), but people apart from God are always sinful and cannot please Him. (See Nahum for more information)
 - What is most surprising about God’s determination to send Jonah to Nineveh? Why?
 - Why is it fitting that God would do so?
 - What lessons can we take from verse 2 regarding evangelism?
2. The sovereignty of God with Jonah and the sailors – 1:11-17. Jonah tries to run from God’s call and go to Tarshish. Its location is unknown but many scholars believe it was somewhere in the western Mediterranean, perhaps Spain. His attempt,, of course is ridiculous but God actually uses it to extend His compassion to a group of pagan sailors.
 - In what ways is God’s sovereign control and power revealed in these verses?
 - We can easily see how silly it is that Jonah thinks he can run from God’s presence. It might be a little harder to see the “silliness” in ourselves. In what ways do we try to run or hide from God today?
 - Trace the development of saving faith in the sailors from verse 5 to verse 14 to verse 16. What lessons does this teach us? Is there anything “inferior” or less “genuine” about coming to faith mainly through fear and deliverance? C.S. Lewis says that “fear isn’t *repentance* – but it’s alright as a beginning – much better at that stage than *not* being afraid.” Is he right? Why or why not?
3. Jonah and Nineveh repent and God relents – 3:3-5, 10. God “commissions” the prophet a second time and this time Jonah obeys and goes to Nineveh. There he preaches what must be the most efficient sermon ever – 8 words (at least in the NLT, NIV, and ESV) and the entire city of 120,000 repents! God then relents of the “disaster that He had said that He would do to them, and He did not do it” (ESV).

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- What do we know about Jonah's repentance? Is it whole hearted (see 4:1-8)? Wouldn't you or Billy Graham or Matt Nickoson be thrilled at such a response to such a short sermon? So does Jonah's attitude surprise you? Why or why not?
 - Based on the response to Jonah's one sentence sermon, what is the real power behind Nineveh's response? What does this tell us about our efforts, motivations, and abilities? Why then is it still important for us to obey and to go and to speak?
 - What are the steps or elements of Nineveh's repentance?
 - God is often described as the "God of second chances." In what ways is that true in this story?
 - In verse 10, we are told that God "relented" (ESV), "had compassion" (NIV), "changed His mind" (NLT). Is this amazing to you – that the Creator and Sustainer of the universe would "change His mind" based on our actions or prayers? Do you believe it? Why or why not? What does this say to the very prevalent attitudes we see in such statements as "que sera," "whatever," "when it's your time it's your time"?
 - Lewis says that "God will use all repented evil as fuel for fresh good in the end." What do you think?
4. God's amazing love and compassion – 4:11. The book of Jonah has an unusual ending. First, God chastises Jonah for his sorrow over a wilted plant (verse 10). Then he asks this question and leaves it for Jonah and for all of us to consider: *"Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel compassion for such a great city?"*
- What is your answer to God's question? The answer appears obvious but do we always feel that compassion?
 - When have you/we tried limiting God's mercy to others, or to yourself?
 - To whom might God be prompting you to show compassion now? Do you feel some resentment at that, like Jonah?
- Consider the following verses:
1. Ezek 33:11. "As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live.
 2. Luke 15:1-10. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.
- Have you learned anything about the character of God from today's study?
 - How is God challenging you from this brief look at Jonah?
 - What attitudes need repenting of, or what actions need to be taken as a result of what you've learned? Think of one way to put compassion into action.