

life groups discussion guide

what in the world does God want from me?



"Most people repent their sins by thanking God they ain't so wicked as their neighbors."
— Josh Billings

"I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice."
— Abraham Lincoln

Most people do not think of Jonah as a great evangelist. We think of Jonah as a reluctant worker of God, someone who had to be forced to preach the gospel. But if we measure an evangelist by the results he delivers, then Jonah can truly be considered a great evangelist. In one day, an entire city turned to the Lord! Which modern day evangelist has this kind of record?

(Jonah 3:4-5 NIV) On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God, declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Q :: The text makes a point to tell us that it takes three days to go through Ninevah. Yet we see Jonah's message begin to convert the city on the very first day. What can we learn from this?

Q :: How did Jonah get such great results. Obedience. But when we read Jonah's story, what we see is not even close to picture-perfect obedience. What are some words you would use to describe Jonah's obedience?

Q :: What does this list of words tell us about how God can work in our own lives – especially when it comes to either being obedient to a specific call or in reaching out to lost people?

Now consider Jonah's attitude. It certainly stank at the onset, but I'd say it scarcely improved once he was regurgitated out onto Ninevah's doorstep. Yes, he proclaimed the message that God has commanded him to proclaim. But look at Jonah 4:1-3.

Q :: What does Jonah's reaction to Ninevah's repentance and God's subsequent sparing of the city tell you about the heart he had while doing what God had commanded?

Q :: What can we learn from this about how God works through people - and through us?

Let's consider the core message of Jonah to the Ninevites. Look at his exact words from Jonah 3:4. What do you think about the tone of Jonah's message? Is it attractive, upbeat and sensitive to the spiritual seeker? In line with the cultural views of the modern man and woman?

Jonah came from a country that was hostile to the Assyrians. Imagine if Vladimir Putin came to the United States and said "In 40 days the great mother of all winds will come and sink your entire navy?" Would he be believed?

Q :: What are some reasons that you would reasonably believe that the Ninevites would NOT respond to Jonah's message?

Q :: Luke 11:30 states that Jonah was a "sign to the Ninevites". In what way do you suppose that Jonah could have been a sign to the people he came to warn?

Q :: Does that provide any insights into how God might use us to be a sign for someone that He would like to reach? Based on Jonah's story, what do you think might be required of us – what is OUR part in this?

I find it interesting that there almost seems to be two different versions of the city of Ninevah in the story. In the first case (1:2), we see a city that has become so evil that its wickedness has “reached up to God”. We don;t get the idea that this is a place with a heart that’s open to God – or anyone who would come with a “message from Him”.

However, in 3:5-9, we see a city that is under such heavy, intense conviction that they IMMEDIATELY declared a fast, dressed in sackcloth, and repented with a capital “R”. The entire city converts, all the way up to the king who, himself, issues a proclamation ordering everyone in city o repent an call on God to show mercy. Even though there was no visible change in the spiritual climate, there was already an invisible change.

Q :: What might account for that radical a shift to happen so quickly after receiving Jonah’s message?

Q :: What does this teach us about the supernatural component of Jonah’s work? What does it tell us about how we perceive the work of reaching out to the lost today?

In many ways, the book of Jonah is one of great mercy. We see it when Jonah is aboard the ship. God, in His mercy, quiets the storm for the sailors once Jonah is thrown in. Jonah is in the belly of the fish after total disobedience, and yet God shows mercy by having the fish puke him up on dry land again after His repentance. God shows mercy to the Ninevites after their repentance. Shoot, He even shows it to the grumbling, complaining prophet by giving him a plant for shade as he moans about God’s mercy being given to the city of Ninevah.

When I look at Jonah’s message to the citizens of Ninevah, I see mercy built into the core of the message in the form of the 40-day deadline. It appears that the city recognizes this as well. I may very well have been THAT that the people responded to.

Q :: Do you think Jonah realized He was preaching a message of mercy?

Q :: If we could be brining a message that is actually different than the one we think we’re bringing, how does that impact either the message we give, or the means by which we give it?

Conclusion:

One of the sources that was researched for this lesson made the following proclamation that I found to be very compelling:

“But God’s dealings with Nineveh were secondary to taming the heart of His prophet.”

I find that amazing in a couple of different ways. One, that Jonah was a prophet of Almighty God – yet, he needed to have radical heart surgery performed on HIMSELF! Scandalous stuff. The man God was telling to preach to a wicked city was in need of the same basic, core message himself.

The other is thing I find amazing is that Jonah was blind to his own need. When God asks him at the end of the book if he has a right to be mad about God destroying the plant that God, Himself, had caused to grow to provide Jonah shade, Jonah says “I do.” Jonah so easily recognizes the lack of compassion in his enemy, but fails to see it in himself.

We are all, at times, in the same boat (pardon the pun) as our reluctant example.

God may very well be calling us to a specific task, or to take a specific message to someone for Him – but I think we would be incredibly well served if we would pause long enough to see if that same task or message is something that God wants us to own up to and embrace ourselves. May God open the eyes of our hearts that we may fully see the measure and scope of our own need.