

JONAH

Week 4 | Rascals | Jonah 1 - 4

Deeper Dive

During this time, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. Jonah was a prophet from the northern kingdom at around 793-753 BC. This was a prosperous time for Israel, but also a time of spiritual and moral decline. As the book of Jonah begins, God calls Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and tell them the prophecy that God would destroy them for their wickedness. Jonah disobeys God and flees in response. In fact, he flees in the literal opposite direction.

Nineveh was the capital of the powerful Assyrian nation, and was becoming a great threat to Israel at the time. Nineveh was heavily populated with over 120,000 inhabitants, described as taking 3 days to walk across, and one of the wealthiest and most powerful cities of their time. The Assyrians were known for their worship of idols, brutality & violence, torture & mutilation of their enemies, temple ritual prostitution, and the practice of child sacrifice. This certainly would not have been a city welcoming of someone like Jonah.

Day 1 - On the run

READ: Jonah 1: 1-3

If you have ever used the phrase “better to ask for forgiveness than permission” then you may have attempted to be in control over a situation by avoiding the one truly in authority over it. This is rarely good advice, and will most often lead to greater conflict long-term.

What about in your spiritual life with the Lord? Have you ever avoided asking for God’s direction, permission, or fully surrendering to His Will? Have you ever feared what God would ask of you? We probably don’t want to admit it, but sometimes we desperately try to hang on to control no matter the cost. The cost of this control is that we put ourselves in the place of God in our lives. We falsely believe that we know best, and we fail to recognize God’s infinite wisdom, faithfulness, and goodness in our lives. There are many reasons we do this. We can fear what God might ask us to do, we can hold tightly to something we don’t want to give up, or similar to Jonah and we can even “disagree” with God’s direction and grace in a situation.

Trying to control can get us stuck in a “monkey trap”. This is the practice of placing an object in a jar, like a banana. The monkey will instinctually reach in and hold on tightly to it. Of course they can’t get their hand out while holding onto the banana, so they are stuck. This is when the hunters can catch them. We might look at this and say, “just let go of the banana and you can be free”! We can see the big picture, the trap that has been set, the consequences of not letting go, and the freedom that is right in front of them with a whole forest of bananas if they would just let go of this one. This is exactly like the Lord’s view of our lives. He sees the big picture, He has a good and perfect plan, He knows what’s best for us, and He knows that temporarily letting go of our false sense of control will lead to a lifetime of freedom with Him.

When God asks Jonah to go to Nineveh, he immediately disobeys and goes the complete opposite direction. Even though Jonah is a prophet, and the Lord directly speaks to him, he can’t surrender. He’s holding onto his banana of control and actively runs from God.

- Where in your life are you running from God? What’s your banana in the jar? Where are you stuck and trapped in your attempts to control? What would it look like to let go?

Deeper Dive

- **Luke 15: 3-7** ~Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.
- **Psalms 23: 4** ~Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- **Hebrews 12:6** ~It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.
- **Romans 8:28** ~And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose

Day 2 - Merciful pursuit

READ: Jonah 1:4-17

If you've ever tried to run from God, then you have experienced His pursuit whether you recognized it at the time or not. Since the Lord is often described as our good shepherd, the Bible gives many references to this pursuit in the context of a shepherd pursuing his sheep. Jesus' parable in Luke 15 says that He would leave 99 sheep to chase after the one that has gone astray. This shows us how extremely valuable each of us are to Him. In Psalms 23 David says "your rod and staff, they comfort me". The shepherd would often use the rod and staff as corrective tools in pursuit of a sheep that's gone astray. Neither would be comfortable for the sheep. However, this was often necessary to protect them from danger and to draw them back to the shepherd who knows what's best for them.

If we look at how God chases after Jonah, we see this terrible storm as God's merciful pursuit. God isn't trying to destroy Jonah, He's re-directing him back to himself in a way that Jonah can't ignore or hide from. Even in this moment of Jonah's direct disobedience, God pursues him with unconditional love and mercy. During the height of the terrible storm, Jonah finally comes to the point of full surrender when he tells the sailors to throw him overboard. Jonah sees his sin and the consequences of his desire to hang on tightly to control. He finally lets go as they throw him into the sea. Of course God's goodness doesn't stop there, as the Lord allows a fish to swallow Jonah. We can only imagine that Jonah isn't seeing God's mercy, goodness, and provision in this exact moment. As he says in verse 12 "I know that it is my fault". A life threatening storm, then a near death drowning at sea, and now being "eaten alive" by a giant fish, doesn't seem like a shining moment in Jonah's life. He can't see the goodness in God's pursuit just yet.

Just like Jonah, we often don't recognize God's merciful pursuit in the moment. Similar to a loving parent putting a child in "time out" for running into the street. The child doesn't view the discipline, the pursuit, or the correction as the love or mercy that it is. In our lives this Godly pursuit can come in the form of corrective words from close friends or family, a sermon message that feels like it was written "specifically for you", or even a painful failure of your own self-made plans that directs your path back to Him.

- Where are the "storms" in your life right now? Where do you feel like you are losing control? Could this be God's merciful pursuit? How could you move to a place of surrender verses control?
- As you look back over your life, can you see moments where what seemed like a total failure, was actually God's protection, mercy, and grace in your life?

Deeper Dive

Additional scripture to meditate on this week.

- **Psalm 34: 18** ~The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
- **James 4:10** ~Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.
- **Luke 15: 20-24** ~ So he got up and went to his father."But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.
- **1 John 1:9** ~If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Day 3 - Surrender

READ: Jonah 2

In the darkest possible moment for Jonah, inside the belly of a giant fish, he finally fully surrenders and turns back to God. It's often in those darkest, most uncomfortable places in our lives that our hearts will soften and shift back to the Lord. As stubborn and prideful people we sometimes actually need these places of total failure where our false illusion of control is completely taken away. This is when God, in His mercy, can often do His deepest work in our souls. Many times we have to go through these humbling moments in order to follow God and surrender our plans, goals, and aspirations to Him. This requires us to recognize that God knows best, has our best interest at heart, and is always good. You may have heard the explanation, "Humility isn't thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less". As we read these verses in Jonah we see this shift. Jonah begins to humble himself and see God's goodness and provision in this dark moment. In verse 6, while still stuck in the belly of a fish, Jonah has hope. He already sees how God saved him when he says, "But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit".

For many of us, during these dark moments when it feels like all hope is lost, it can be tempting to believe the lie that you are too far gone for God to hear you. We can even falsely believe that God won't rescue us for many different reasons. Maybe we feel this need to be punished because of our shame, or that God is angry with us, or that we've been forgiven too many times. The enemy wants us to believe that God is limited in His grace, mercy, and forgiveness. When we believe these lies in the darkness it can cause us to lose hope, become depressed, and drift into despair. Sometimes, we may need the help of a pastor, trusted friend, or a therapist when we get into these pits of despair.

Rest assured God does not want us to stay in that pit. He doesn't want us to stay in the belly of the fish. We see this over and over again in scripture. As soon as Jonah cries out to the Lord, he is rescued. In Jesus' parable of the lost son in Luke 15, as soon as the lost son begins to walk towards the Father's house, the Father runs to him and meets him right where he is in all his sin and messiness. The Father immediately restores the son to his place in the family and celebrates his return. No matter how far from God you feel in this moment, no matter how far into the pit, or how deep you are in the belly of a giant fish, God hears our cry. The Lord is like the Father waiting and watching for us to make that turn back towards Him.

- Are there areas in your life right now that feel like the belly of a fish? Areas that you feel far from God? Areas that you feel like God can't hear your cry? Areas where you are losing hope?
- Take time today to confess these areas to the Lord. He already knows, He sees you there, He is waiting for your cry. Don't wait any longer, get outside help if you need it, and cry out to Him today.

Deeper Dive

Additional scripture to meditate on this week.

- **John 21: 15-17** ~“ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”
- **2 Peter 3:9** ~The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.
- **Matthew 18: 32-35**
~“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Day 4 - “Do-over!”

READ: Jonah 3-4

As a kid you probably remember yelling, “do-over”! Maybe you messed up, didn’t score the point, or tripped over your own two feet and made this glorious declaration. We all know that a “do-over” basically wipes the slate clean and gives you another chance to try again. Thankfully, God allows for plenty of “do-overs” in our lives. The Lord gives Jonah a “do-over” after he is rescued him from the fish in verse 3:1. This time Jonah is obedient and goes straight to Nineveh.

We see this in the gospels when Jesus gives Peter a “do-over” after his denial before His crucifixion. In John 21, Jesus appears to the disciples while they are fishing. Jesus specifically asks Peter three times if he loves Him. This was Peter’s ultimate “do-over” moment because Peter had denied Jesus three times on the night of His trial and death. In both instances, Peter realizes what he’s done after the third time. Jesus graciously took the time to restore His relationship with Peter and to heal his shame in the way that he could understand.

Of course if you’ve ever heard someone shout “do-over”, you’ve probably also heard someone angrily shout back “NO do-overs”. This is exactly what Jonah screamed after the Lord had mercy on the city of Nineveh. Following Jonah’s message of the Lord’s impending judgement and destruction, the King repents and Nineveh turns away from their evil ways. God mercifully responds with a “do-over” moment in verse 3:10. Ironically, Jonah becomes enraged that the Lord would give Nineveh the same mercy that he had just received for his own sin and disobedience. In fact, Jonah doesn’t stop there, he basically has a full blown “tantrum” with the Lord. At one point he even says it would be better to die than to accept the Lord’s mercy for these people. God continues to pursue Jonah, even while he is angry and stuck in his hypocrisy and sin, just as He does with each of us. He graciously takes the time to demonstrate a lesson in compassion and mercy with a plant, a worm, and the heat of the desert sun.

God calls us to show His forgiveness, mercy and compassion to others. In the strongly worded parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18, Jesus similarly calls us to pass along the same mercy, grace, and forgiveness that the Lord gives to us. We are called to accept “do-overs” from others, just as God accepts them from us.

- Are you struggling with a “do-over” moment for yourself? How can you move towards allowing God to restore and heal your shame?
- Are you struggling with someone else’s “do-over”? How could you move towards the same forgiveness, mercy, and compassion that the Lord gives to you? (NOTE: God never wants us to be in an abusive or toxic relationship. Sometimes this process requires a pastor or therapist to be involved with certain “do-over” patterns.)

Deeper Dive

- **Luke 15: 28-32** ~"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'" "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"
- **James 1:22** ~Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.
- **Romans 5: 3-4** ~Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.
- **Luke 6: 27-28** ~But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Day 5 - Moving towards heart change

Jonah moved toward surrender and obedience to the Lord, however, his heart remained hard towards Nineveh. He missed out on the restorative purpose of God's message to this lost city. Even after experiencing his own personal struggles and God's mercy first hand, he resisted allowing his heart to soften in compassion towards others in a similar situation.

Outward obedience alone doesn't always indicate true heart change. We can outwardly obey God while still resisting Him inwardly. Looking again at the lost son parable in Luke 15, we see this with the older brother. He was outwardly obedient to the Father, however, His heart remained hard and full of resentment. This made him feel like a slave instead of a son, and ultimately caused him to miss out joining in the family celebration. Jesus told this parable to the religious leaders as a warning against their own hypocrisy.

God cares much more about the posture of our hearts towards Him and others, than he does checking all those "spiritual practices" boxes. Let's take a look at how we can collectively move towards surrender, obedience, and true heart change.

1. **Trust and obey** - James 1:22 - If you feel a nudge from the Spirit, move in obedience immediately. Trust God's perspective over your own preferences. Instead of getting stuck in overthinking and control, let go and surrender of all the details. Move towards obedience without seeing the full picture just yet. Trust HIM, trust in His goodness, trust in who God says He is!
2. **Reflect instead of resent** - Romans 5: 3-4 - Let the hard seasons soften your heart instead of hardening it. Choose to reflect and seek the Lord's goodness in what you're going through instead of resentment and bitterness. Ask the Lord - "what are you teaching me here?" verses "why is this happening to me?" Reach out to the Lord whether you're in the belly of the fish, or at the bottom of the pit. You are never too far away for Him to hear your voice. He is waiting and ready to meet you where you are.
3. **Check your heart** - Luke 6:27-28 - Allow God to move in your heart, and not just your actions. Ask the Lord - "Is my heart aligned with yours?" and not just "Am I doing the right thing?". Let God move you away from your pride, bitterness, resentment, and entitlement. Pray for those that frustrate you or that need forgiveness and mercy. Let go of the need for "earned" compassion and give others the same unconditional grace that the Lord gives you.