

STUDY THREE

Jonah

Study Passages

Jonah 1

¹ The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

³ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

⁴ Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. ⁶ The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

⁷ Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to

find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

⁹ He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

¹⁰ This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

¹¹ The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

¹² “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased.” ¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. ¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

¹⁷ Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and

Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah 2

¹ From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. ² He said:

“In my distress I called to the Lord,
and he answered me.
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.
³ You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.
⁴ I said, ‘I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.’
⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me,
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.
⁶ To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever.
But you, Lord my God,
brought my life up from the pit.

⁷ “When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, Lord,

and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.

⁸ “Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God’s love for them.

⁹ But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will make good.

I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord.’”

¹⁰ And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto
dry land.

Jonah 3

¹ Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go
to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I
give you.”

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.
Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go
through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city,
proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be over-
thrown.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed,
and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose
from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with
sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ This is the proclamation
he issued in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Jonah 4

¹ But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

⁴ But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

⁵ Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant^[a] and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very

happy about the plant. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

"It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

¹⁰ But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

Matthew 12:38-41

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now some—

thing greater than Jonah is here.

Introduction

The first two studies showed us the spiritual battle raging for God's kingdom to expand in and through the nation of Israel. God uses a covenant with Abraham to bless him and make him a blessing to all nations. He uses the temple as a practical example of his presence on earth and his desire to see his name proclaimed to all nations. Israel was supposed to be a "light on a hill" with the temple as its central lighthouse—shining God's light to the world and drawing the nations to God. At least, this was supposed to happen. Israel failed on this account and the book of Jonah provides a window into why. Nationalism, legalism, prejudice, and hardness of heart destroyed their compassion for those outside of their own nation. They wanted God to judge, not save. They wanted God to condemn, not show mercy. They wanted God to destroy, not show compassion. This window into the failure of Israel (and the failure of many Christians today) is personified in the person Jonah. The story begins with God's command to Jonah to "go" to Nineveh as his ambassador, to tell them to repent, and tell them to turn their hearts back to God. Called to go and evangelize Nineveh, Jonah instead constructs a different plan.

Starting the Discussion

1. Do you think Christians are characterized by compassion for unbelievers or an "us vs. them" mindset? Why or why not? How have you seen this "us vs. them" mindset played out in the church and culture?

Exploring the Text

Read Jonah 1

2. What does Jonah do in response to God's call to go and preach? What words or phrases describe the severity of Jonah's actions?
3. Why do you think Jonah refused to go? Do you think Jonah imagined he'd be able to get away from God?
4. In Jonah 1:9, how is Jonah's description of God contrary to his heart and actions?
5. What words or phrases describe the spiritual responsiveness of the sailors?
6. God uses Jonah, in spite of himself, to bring the message of salvation to the Gentile sailors. What does this say about the plan, purposes, and mission of God?

Read Jonah 2:1-4:3

7. What do we learn about God and his character?
8. How would you describe Jonah's repentance and subsequent actions?
9. What do we learn was Jonah's real reason for running from God?
10. How would you describe the Ninevites' actions and

repentance? Would you describe their repentance as genuine? Why or why not?

Read Jonah 4:4-11

11. What do we learn about Jonah from this interaction with God and with the plant?

12. Often in the Old Testament, the vine is symbolic of Israel. If that is the case here, what then is God saying to Jonah and Israel in this demonstration?

Implications and Applications

13. Like Jonah, in what ways have you spiritually been running away or sleeping? What would authentic repentance look like for you in this area?

14. Jonah and God's chosen people were often more concerned with judging non-believers, instead of proclaiming the good news of God. How have you seen Christians act the same? How have you seen yourself do that too?

15. Read Matthew 12:38-41. How was Jonah a symbol of something similar and yet something greater to come? What should we do in response to the message of Jesus (the greater Jonah)?

Considerations and Synopsis

Chapter 1

The story begins with God's command to Jonah to go to Nineveh as his ambassador and warn them that, if they don't repent, judgment will come. This same command to go is used in the Great Commission text of Matthew 28:18-20, where Jesus tells his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations...but we'll get to more of that specific commission in the next study. Back in the first three verses of Jonah, some of the poetic crafting is lost in translation from Hebrew to English. There are a few things you'll miss if you're not fluent in Semitic languages or ancient Jewish maps (I'm not, but I am fluent in using Google):

In verse 1, God tells Jonah to "arise and go" but in verse 3, Jonah instead "arose and went to run away." The words make the disobedience emphatic. It's worth looking at a map to see the extreme lengths Jonah takes to run away from God. Tarshish is more than 2,500 miles west of Israel. In fact, Tarshish was the most remote destination west of Israel known to man (in modern day Portugal). Nineveh, on the other hand, was 600 miles to the east of Israel, a much shorter distance. Jonah purposely travels in the exact opposite direction of God's command. Also, in the opening few verses, the word "down" appears three times in the Hebrew, alluding to Jonah's spiritual nosedive. He goes "down" to Joppa, he "went down" into the ship, and, when the storm comes, he "went down" inside the ship and fell into a deep sleep. As these emphatic words paint a picture of Jonah's actions, it also describes the deepness of Jonah's heartfelt rebellion.

As Jonah sleeps, a great storm kicks up—but it's no ordinary storm. The text states that this storm is specifically sent by God. The

response and actions of the Gentile sailors are of note, for while they do not yet know the one true God, they are more spiritually responsive than Jonah, each “crying out to their own god.” Further, when they recognize that Jonah is the problem, they urge him to call out to God. In an act of kindness, they do their best to row back to shore, instead of immediately throwing Jonah overboard. Finally, when their lives are about to end, they do throw Jonah overboard. They then pray to the one true God asking for forgiveness, offering sacrifice and making vows to him.

Chapter 1 is filled with irony. It’s the Gentile sailors who truly fear God, not the Jewish man Jonah. It’s also the sailors who repent and come to a saving faith. This seems to foreshadow the New Testament in that Israel rejects Jesus, but the gospel finds an eager audience among the Gentiles. Also ironic: Jonah tells the sailors that he worships the God “who made the sea and the land.” Clearly, Jonah believes that God is the God of the whole world, but he lives as if God was only the God of the Jews.

Chapter 2

In chapter 2, Jonah is swallowed by a fish. While inside the belly of the fish, Jonah prays a beautiful prayer attributing to God all the greatness that is due his name—recognizing God’s salvation, provision, help, and compassion. When Jonah repents and cries out to the Lord, the fish “spews” him out on dry land. This event is prophetic in two ways: First, in a century or so, God will discipline Israel for their hard-heartedness. They will be taken into captivity in Babylon until God causes Babylon to “spew” them back out: “I will punish Babylon and make him spew out what he has swallowed” (Jer. 51:44). Secondly, Jonah’s plunge into the abyss foreshadows the death and resurrection of Christ: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights

in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40). Like the sacrifice of throwing Jonah overboard, Jesus’s death abates the wrath of God and brings salvation to the Gentiles.

Chapter 3

However, here we observe that Jonah’s change of heart and repentance was disingenuous: he ventures only one day into the city when it took “three days” to go across, and his message centers on judgement, not the option of repentance and the possibility of divine mercy. His message is so short, you might miss it: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” That was it. We also learn the original reason for Jonah’s running away. It wasn’t fear for his life from the evil Ninevites. He actually feared that the Ninevites would repent and that God would forgive them: “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” It is astonishing, but in this book central to the Hebrew Scripture, it is the Gentiles who fear God, not Israel. Responding to Jonah’s message, the Ninevites repent, putting on sackcloth, rolling in the dust, fasting, calling on God, and giving up their evil ways. Jonah feigned repentance in the fish but the Ninevites sincerely repented.

Chapter 4

In storybooks and Sunday school, Jonah 4 is often skipped in the teachings because it is neither a neat nor happy ending. The story leaves Jonah in much the same hardened condition as we initially found him. God teaches Jonah a lesson using a vine—the vine in this case represents Israel. Among the messages: Israel is without compassion; Israel thinks only of itself; as recipients of grace, Israel

should have shown grace to others. Israel ceased to be a channel of God's grace, but instead became a roadblock to the mission. But where Jonah and Israel failed in their role as a mediator in God's plan of redemption, Christ was victorious! Israel's failure to expand and proclaim God's kingdom to the world necessitates and points to the coming of Christ, the ultimate mediator between God and a lost world. He is the ultimate missionary who came to "seek and save the lost." Matthew 12:38-41 even makes this connection for us between Jonah and Jesus: Jonah was a poor example of the one to come who would proclaim God's forgiveness to an evil and adulterous people. It tells us the Ninevites repented when Jonah preached—and how much more should we all repent because the greater Jonah, Jesus, is here. Jesus is the ultimate evangelist, the ultimate missionary, and the ultimate source of compassion for the nations.