

JONAH



THE PURSUIT OF GOD

Introduction	3
Helpful Hints	4
Recommended Reading	5
Jonah 1:1-6	6
Jonah 1:7-16	9
Jonah 2	12
Jonah 3	15
Jonah 4	19

Introduction

Jonah is a book that reveals the pursuing, gracious Creator God of the Bible while also exposing the selfish, self-righteous rebellion we all face. Through its focus on a reluctant, rebellious prophet, the book highlights the center of Scripture's story: the Lord and Giver of life, whose compassion overflows for even the worst of the worst rebels, will pursue those for whom He has died and resurrected, because salvation belongs only and entirely to Him and Him alone.

Helpful Hints

Remember: The Old Testament, including Jonah, is crucial for understanding the New Testament. As O. Palmer Robertson quips, "The basis of all of the teaching of Jesus, Paul and all of the other apostles was the Old Testament Scriptures. The reason that a great deal of the church is immature in its development is because of a weak understanding of the Old Testament."¹

Quotes, allusions, parallels, or references from Jonah in the New Testament:

Matthew 12:38-42

Matthew 16:1-4

Luke 11:29-32

Mark 4:35-41; Matt. 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25

Revelation 7:10 (Salvation belongs to...)

Acts 10-11 (The missional call to Gentiles and the believer's resistance)

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, "Old Testament Biblical Theology," seminary class notes, published by RPM, Volume 18, Number 19, May 1 to May 7, 2016.

The Structure of Jonah²

SCENE 1 Jonah, the pagans, and the sea	SCENE 2 Jonah, the pagans, and the city
JONAH AND GOD'S WORD	
1:1 God's Word comes to Jonah	3:1 God's Word comes to Jonah
1:2 The message to be conveyed	3:2 The message to be conveyed
1:3 The response of Jonah	3:3 The response of Jonah
JONAH AND GOD'S WORLD	
1:4 The word of warning	3:4 The word of warning
1:5 The response of the pagans	3:5 The response of the pagans
1:6 The response of the pagan leader	3:6 The response of the pagan leader
1:7ff How the pagan's response was ultimately better than Jonah's	3:7ff How the pagan's response was ultimately better than Jonah's
JONAH AND GOD'S GRACE	
2:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the fish	4:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the plant

Recommended Reading

Free Commentary (TGC)

Tim Keller Sermons on Jonah

Beginner Commentary: A Study in Compassion by O. Palmer Robertson

Beginner Commentary: The Prodigal Prophet by Timothy Keller

² This chart is from Timothy Keller, The Prodigal Prophet, page 3.

Jonah 1:1-6

MAIN POINT

God calls Jonah to go east to Nineveh with a hard word of warning, but Jonah runs down to Joppa, down into the ship, and down, away from the Lord's presence. God answers Jonah with pursuit instead of abandonment.

GROUP INTRO

If your life had a theme song right now, what would it be, and why?

TEXT

1. Read Jonah 1:1-3. Why does the text say Jonah fled "from the presence of the LORD" when God is everywhere?

Leader help: Jonah isn't outrunning God's omnipresence; he's resisting God's mission and God's mercy (especially toward Israel's enemies). His movement "down" (to Joppa, into the ship) is a picture of spiritual descent. As O. Palmer Robertson writes, "Life never stands still. Either you are running with the will of God, or you are fleeing from the will of God."³

³ O. Palmer Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in Compassion*, page 12.

2. Read verses 4-6. What is God doing with this storm: punishing, rescuing, or something else?

Leader help: The storm is God's way of specifically and intentionally targeting/pursuing Jonah. God "hurls" the wind (the Hebrew word is used elsewhere to describe throwing a spear). Yet the storm is also judgment on Jonah's rebellion, as well as mercy that prevents Jonah from further spiritual hardening. And in the midst of all this, God also does something that reveals a piece of the entire biblical story: through the storm, He pursues pagan sailors and awakens them to who He is.

3. Read verses 1-2 again. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, Nineveh is presented as an enemy of God (see Nahum 3:1-7), and the Ninevites were known for extreme brutality⁴. How is the command for Jonah to "call out against" this city a demonstration of God's mercy?

Leader help: God intends to give the city and everyone who hears Jonah's preaching a chance to repent. The background information about Nineveh helps us understand the gravity and offense of God's mercy.

⁴ Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Timothy Keller writes, "After capturing enemies, the Assyrians would typically cut off their legs and one arm, leaving the other arm and hand so they could shake the victim's hand in mockery as he was dying. They forced friends and family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones elevated on poles. They pulled out prisoners' tongues and stretched their bodies with ropes so they could be flayed alive and their skins displayed on city walls." (Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet*, pages 10-11).

APPLICATION

1. Where are you currently “going down” to avoid God’s commands? It could be a habit, relationship, career track, hidden compromise, or bitterness you’re holding.
2. When God interrupts your plans and schedule, how do you react, and what does this say about your implicit view of Him? (i.e., can you receive God’s interruptions, including unexpected sickness, loss, or redirects, with humility?)
3. Who are the people you believe (or secretly hope) are either beyond mercy or not worth the discomfort of pursuing and telling biblical truth to? How does this passage challenge you?

PRAYER

Praise God for His commitment to discipline you in order to make you more like Him.

Passage to guide your prayers: Hebrews 12:5-11

Ask God to help you trust Him, even in “storms” of all kinds, knowing He’s sovereign and intentional in what He brings and allows.

Passage to guide your prayers: Mark 4:35-41

Admit your selfishness and self-righteousness.

Passage to guide your prayers: John 13:34-35

Jonah 1:7-16

MAIN POINT

Pagan sailors cast lots and discover Jonah is the cause of their disaster, not by chance, but by God's providence. Jonah confesses that he fears God, but his life contradicts this confession. God's pursuit of the rebellious brings opportunities for unbelievers to meet Him.

GROUP INTRO

What helps you feel seen, known, or included in new spaces?

TEXT

1. Read verses 7-10. What does the sailors' casting of lots reveal about God?

Leader help: This exposes Jonah because God sovereignly governs even seemingly random events (see Prov. 16:33). This is God's providence overriding human uncertainty. God's lordship means He's in control of history, nature, and human decisions. Not even rebellion is outside of God's sovereign reign. Jonah's been "made," and God will use this opportunity to not only pursue him, but also these unbelieving sailors.

2. Read verses 11-16. Why are the sailors more concerned about what's right than one of God's own prophets?

Leader help: They're recognizing what's happening around them and are actually treating God with reverence, while Jonah's willing to die instead of repenting and obeying. This shows Jonah's spiritual pride. The warning for those who grow up around church is that we can know true things about God without trusting or loving Him. It's possible to be less receptive to God's grace because religious acts or good works mask our pride. This is why we must continually engage with God's Word: to recognize how holy He is, how far we fall short, and how amazing He is to love us freely in Christ.

3. Read verse 12. Is Jonah's willingness to be thrown into the sea evidence of his repentance? Why or why not?

Leader help: The passage never calls this repentance. His willingness looks more like resignation than repentance/surrender to God. But God's grace is revealed in that He uses Jonah's partial, flawed, sinful self-offering to save others. In the larger biblical story, this points us to Jesus, who willingly offers Himself in perfect surrender and love, who endures the worst "storm" of God's judgment.

APPLICATION

1. How can we actually come to a posture of free, joyful surrender to Christ, even when His calls to us are difficult and uncomfortable?

2. Think back over the last three weeks. How have you treated people who are currently far from God? Why?
3. When God exposes our sin, how do we help one another move toward Christ rather than despair, resignation, or apathy?

PRAYER

Confess to God how you've been a hearer of His Word rather than a doer of the Word.

Passage to guide your prayers: James 1:19-22

Ask God to radically re-awaken you to His grace and to continue eliminating self-righteousness.

Passage to guide your prayers: Luke 18:9-14

Jonah tried to act as a reluctant substitute, but praise Jesus for actually substituting Himself for you and dying and rising in your place.

Passage to guide your prayers: 2 Corinthians 5:21

Jonah 2

MAIN POINT

Cast into the deep, Jonah experiences exile, judgment, and mercy all at once, and we get an Old Testament gospel confession: “Salvation belongs to the LORD.” God’s storm drove Jonah down so that God could bring him back alive, pointing forward to Jesus, who entered death and was resurrected in power, securing our salvation.

GROUP INTRO

What’s one way your faith has grown in the past year?

TEXT

1. Read verses 1-9. How would you categorize Jonah’s prayer?

Leader help: Jonah’s prayer is genuinely grateful and biblical, but falls short of repentance. Notice that he thanks God but doesn’t confess his specific sins, as if he loves God as Deliverer, but not Lord. Biblical repentance always includes specific confession and a return to God and His ways, which is why the Bible declares that repentance must be given by God (see Acts 11:18).

2. Read verses 2-4. Why does Jonah describe his situation as being in “Sheol,” “the deep,” and “driven away from Your sight” if he’s still alive?

Leader help: Jonah uses the language of death and exile because, in the Bible, “sea” represents chaos and judgment (see Ps. 88). Jonah’s alive, but he’s experienced a death-like judgment. Some scholars believe that Jonah did die and later composed this poem/song as a way to praise God after being raised. Either way, this chapter prepares us for Jesus’ own interpretation of the event: Jonah’s three days in the fish prefigure His descent into death and resurrection life (Matt. 12:40). Jonah is saved from death; Jesus saves through death. In this way, Jonah is like a living symbol of God’s saving grace. He can now walk to Nineveh as a living example of what God can do for rebels, even spiritually dead rebels.

3. Read verses 6 and 9. What does “Salvation belongs to the LORD” mean in the story of the Bible?

Leader help: Salvation is not earned by anyone or anything except Jesus, who is the LORD, and Him alone. He is the covenant God who Himself earns and gifts salvation. So from beginning to end, our rescue from sin, wrath, and eternal death is entirely due to God alone. God accomplishes what we can’t (see Rom. 8:3-4). Jonah is a picture of this truth, and even of our own need not just to grasp salvation as a doctrine but to experience it personally as a reality in our lives.

APPLICATION

1. How would you know if you love God only as Rescuer but not as Lord?
2. What do gospel-centered responses to failure look like? What might it look like when someone is responding to their sin and failure with shame, guilt, or fear?
3. Sometimes it's easy to affirm God's grace as a doctrine while struggling to embrace it and extend it to others. How can the love of Christ for each of us help us genuinely repent and live out God's mission of telling others about Him?

PRAYER

Praise God that forgiveness is readily available and that God hears us in our neediness.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 130:1-4

Ask God to help you navigate hard, dark times, knowing and trusting that just because you're suffering doesn't mean you're abandoned or done for.

Passage to guide your prayers: Romans 8:28

Praise God for the security He's freely given you through adoption.

Passage to guide your prayers: Ephesians 2:8-9

Jonah 3

MAIN POINT

God speaks again to Jonah with grace. Jonah obeys, enters Nineveh, and delivers a stark, short sermon of impending judgment. Shockingly, Nineveh believes God. This is the power of God's Word, and it also reveals how God's mercy offends and exposes the self-righteous.

GROUP INTRO

What's one Bible character or story you've always been drawn to, and why?

TEXT

1. Read verses 1-2. Why does God recommission Jonah instead of replacing him?

Leader help: God's second call reveals that obedience is grounded not in Jonah's reliability but in God's grace. The mission does not depend on the messenger, but on our faithful God. Throughout Scripture, God binds Himself not to us and our obedience but to His covenant Word and purposes. God works through His redeemed people, not perfect people.

Jonah's experience also shapes him into a message from God to unbelievers: if God can bring Jonah through His judgment and recommission him, there's hope for the Ninevites as well.

2. Read verses 3-9. How is it that Jonah's short, unimpressive proclamation results in mass repentance?

Leader help: The power of God's Word is evident here. It doesn't matter that Jonah's message is brief and simple because it's God's Word, and it's God who grants repentance and faith. Notice that the Ninevites "believed God," not Jonah. We don't have to be impressive or scholarly evangelists, just faithful disciples who bring God's Word. This is similar to Acts 2, wherein Peter delivered incredibly hard words, and some people thought he and the disciples were drunk, but the Spirit was coming in power, doing what only God can do: causing people to be born again through the proclamation of His Word.

3. Read verse 10. What does it mean here for God to "relent"?

Leader help: Throughout Scripture, God threatens judgment in order to produce repentance (Jer. 18:7-8). This isn't God changing His mind, but being faithful to His larger purpose: to warn Nineveh and show mercy to one of Israel's fiercest enemies, thereby displaying His character and exposing the self-righteousness and self-centeredness of His people. Though Israel was supposed to be a blessing to the nations, they turned inward. In the Bible's big story, judgment truly falls, and mercy is truly secured in Jesus alone.

Leader help is continued on the next page.

Leader help:

Theologian O. Palmer Robertson also points out the following: "Little distinctions in the Hebrew Bible often mean a lot. Jonah's new commission is almost exactly the same as the first one God gave him. But the change of one letter makes all the difference. On the first occasion, God told Jonah to cry out against the city. Now God tells him to cry out to the city."⁵

APPLICATION

1. How do we ensure our group and our church are places where gracious "second chances" exist?
2. God gives us His Word to transform us and gift us repentance and faith. What does it look like to humbly, in faith, listen to the proclamation of God's Word by faithful pastors, even if you don't like how it's preached (the delivery or tone or words used) or who preaches it (i.e., you have a problem with the pastor)?
3. Share with our group about a time when you witnessed shocking repentance. What was your initial reaction to this miracle, and why?

⁵ Robertson, Jonah, pages 41-42.

PRAYER

Confess to God any hardness of heart toward Christians who have failed, and ask Him to help you have a willingness to extend second-chance mercy.

Passage to guide your prayers: Proverbs 24:16

Praise God for who He is, and for proving His steadfast love through Christ.

Passage to guide your prayers: Joel 2:12-13

Ask God to make our group and church places where there is genuine, lasting joy over every sinner who repents.

Passage to guide your prayers: Luke 15:7, 10

Jonah 4

MAIN POINT

God's mercy enrages Jonah, prompting him to (strangely) accuse God of being how He's always been: gracious and merciful. God again responds with something to mercifully challenge and expose Jonah's own heart: a plant. The book ends unresolved, presenting a question to all who read Jonah: Will you share God's heart of compassion?

GROUP INTRO

If you had to give a TED Talk on one totally random subject with zero prep, what could you actually talk about?

TEXT

1. Read verses 1-4. Why is Jonah angry at God?

Leader help: Despite receiving God's mercy himself, Jonah wants justice for the enemies of Israel. His anger reveals that he loves his national identity, so-called moral superiority, and comfort more than God's mission. In other words, he wants the privileges of belonging to God without sharing God's purposes and love for others. He may also be thinking that God's moving the center of His redemptive mission outside of Israel and toward the Gentiles, something that would bother a man full of spiritual/religious pride and self-righteousness.

2. Read verses 5-8. What is the point of the plant, the worm, and the east wind?

Leader help: God uses a living parable to expose Jonah's heart. Jonah grieves the loss of a plant he did nothing to earn, yet feels no compassion for a city full of God's image-bearers. The issue here isn't Jonah's emotion, but his love of self that has replaced love for others. The question for Jonah is: What exactly is it that you think you deserve, and why do you care more about that than these people made in God's image?

3. Read verses 9-11. Why does the book end without Jonah's response?

Leader help: The silence intentionally turns the mirror toward the reader. Will God's people rejoice in the mercy He has given and then turn around and refuse to offer that mercy to others through mission? But more than this, the ending creates a desire for a better prophet, one who doesn't just announce mercy, but embodies and secures it: Jesus. Jesus also pursues sinners, confronts self-righteous anger (through the Spirit and the Word), welcomes repentant sinners, and calls us to leave our comfort and go out with the gospel to those whom He places in our lives.

APPLICATION

1. Describe a time when God made you angry and how God graciously exposed your pride or self-righteousness.

2. God's priority is people, and He calls us to bring His gospel to them with truth and grace. What in your life right now takes up more of your attention, thoughts, time, and money than this mission? If you need help being real with yourself, look at your social media, bank account, text messages, or screen time.
3. How does the gospel challenge our instincts to compare, resent, or withhold compassion?

PRAYER

Praise God for His steadfast love and mercy.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 103:8-13

Admit your selfish lifestyle, and ask God to help you get going on His Great Commission.

Passage to guide your prayers: Matthew 28:18-20

Ask God to save specific unbelievers in your life and to give you His compassion for them.

Passage to guide your prayers: Romans 2:1-4