

JONAH

## Contents

Lesson one	Introduction
Lesson two	Jonah takes flight
Lesson three	Spiritual apathy
Lesson four	Inside the fish
Lesson five	Jonah's prayer
Lesson six	Jonah is recommissioned
Lesson seven	Jonah's anger
Lesson eight	A book about you

## Jonah

### Lesson One

#### Introduction

##### A subversive prophet

Jonah is the story about a rebellious prophet who hates God for loving his enemies. Jonah is unique among the prophetic books of the Old Testament because they are typically collections of God's words spoken through the prophets but this book does not actually focus on the words of the prophet rather it is a story about a prophet, a really mean and nasty prophet.

Jonah appears one other time in the Old Testament, it's during the reign of Jeroboam 11 one of Israel's worst kings. Jonah prophesies in his favour promising he would win a battle and regain all territory on Israel's northern border. At the same time the prophet Amos also confronted Jeroboam and through him God specifically reversed Jonah's prophecy promising that Jeroboam would lose all these same territories because he was not a good king. Before the story of Jonah is told we are suspicious of his character.

##### A carefully crafted book

The book of Jonah has a beautiful design with literary pairing and symmetry. We have chapters one and three telling the story of Jonah's encounters with non-Israelites. First with the sailors and then with Jonah's hated enemies the Ninevites and each part offers a comic contrast between Jonah's selfishness and the pagans repentance. Chapters two and four contain prayers of Jonah. One is a prayer of repentance, kind of, and the other is a prayer where Jonah severely reprimands God for being too nice.

##### A satirical book

The story is full of stereotype characters who ironically do the exact opposite of what you think they would do. You have the prophet, the man of God, who rebels and hates his own God. The sailors who are supposed to be immoral but have soft repentant hearts and turn to God in humility. You have the King of the most powerful murderous empire on the planet humbling himself before God because of Jonah's five word sermon. And even the cows repent. This kind of story fits with what we would call satire. It is a story about well known figures who are placed in extreme circumstances and they all use humour and irony to critique their stupidity and characteristic flaws.

##### A children's book

Because it is one of the top ten Bible stories told to children we understand it in that way and it has been mediated to us through children's media. A bland truth and a nice story, the focus being a prophet of God who was saved by a great fish.

In this study we will rescue it and bring it back into the sacred scriptures. Its purpose is to reveal the character of God and the purposes of Jesus. It is possibly the most brilliantly told story in the Bible full of wit, irony, humour and sarcasm. Jonah represents the covenant people of God and what this book does by holding up this horrible person it challenges each one of us exposing what might be in us, pride, judgmentalism, small mindedness, hard-heartedness and tribalism. This story brilliantly shines a light on the souls of God's people.

### A book about a prophet

Jonah is a prophetic book but not like all the other prophetic books of the Old Testament. Although the opening words of chapter one might indicate this "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai," For this is how a number of the books of the prophets are introduced to us. Micah the book that follows on from Jonah opens with these same words and then continues through its seven chapters with the words or visions that came from God to his people. The book of Jonah is not a book of prophecy, What we get is a story about a prophet. God speaking to his people through a story is the message of the whole book.

The Bible comprises many different forms of literature; law, history, poetry, prophecy, gospels, wisdom and letters. What kind of story is this? The Book of Jonah stands alone, there is no other book like it. It has its own unique story telling style. There are two views generally held by theologians. The first is the author is passing on this story as a historical account, and the second is it is a parable based on a real person.

In Luke 16 Jesus expresses a parable like this it's about a rich man and a man called Lazarus. He uses a named figure and puts him into a parable setting.

As you read it you are free to make up your own mind:

- Jonah in the great fish is a type of Jesus in the grave.
- Historical events in the Bible can be fixed in time, not Jonah.
- Recorded events in Israel's history give names, Jonah does not.

It is a beautiful piece of literature while at the same time comic extreme and crazy.

- The prophet is the most hated person
- God's message only contains five Hebrew words
- God is severely reprimanded by his servant
- The bad guys are good
- The cows repent
- The word huge is used fifteen times
- Much is blown out of proportion

The truth is we don't expect this in the Bible. This is satire and irony. But what it does is wake us up to the worst tendencies found in God's people.

His name means 'dove' son of 'faithfulness'. He is in fact the most faithless person in the story.

The introduction now complete, we can start to explore the brilliant little book and discover all that God wants to show us about ourselves.

## Lesson Two

### Jonah takes flight

#### Chapter one overview

The story opens as God addresses Jonah and commissions him to go and preach against the evil and injustice in Nineveh the capital city of the Assyrian empire, Israel's bitter enemy. But instead of going east to Nineveh Jonah goes in the opposite direction finding a ship going as far west as you can go to Tarshish. Now the big question here is why does Jonah run? Is he afraid? Does he just not like Ninevites? We are not told yet. So the man of God tries to run from God and he boards a ship full of pagan sailors and he goes down into the ship and falls asleep.

So God sends a huge storm to wake up his prophet while ironically the sailors are above board wide awake to what is happening. They can discern that a divine power is at work here. So they throw the dice and discover that Jonah is the culprit. They ask Jonah to explain himself and he spouts off a whole lot of religious mumbo jumbo. He says yes I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord who made the seas and the dry land. What a joke! God did indeed make the sea and the dry land so why is Jonah dumb enough to get on a boat. When the sailors ask Jonah what they should do he says kill me by throwing me overboard which kind of seems noble at first until you realise this could be the most selfish move yet. What better way to avoid going to Nineveh and he puts his blood on these innocent sailors hands by trying to force them to kill him. They are reluctant of course and repent to God even as they toss him over.

The storm subsides and they end up fearing the God of Israel and unlike Jonah they actually worship God. But God foils Jonah's plans to escape Nineveh. As Jonah is sinking God provides this strange watery tomb for him the stomach of a large fish. Now of course, under normal circumstances, this would be certain death but in this story everything is upside down and so Jonah's submarining death becomes his passage back to life.

#### The brutality of Ninevites

The people of Nineveh were the opposite of everything God's people held dear. They were known for their cruelty, killing men, raping women, ripping babies from wombs, and crushing children's heads against rocks. They often skinned their victims and impaled their bodies, leaving them to die. They often forced parents to watch their children get buried alive before murdering the parents. They also buried victims up to their necks in sand and left them to die of hunger, thirst, or wild animal attack. Entire cities would commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Ninevites.

#### God sends Jonah to Nineveh

God looked at Nineveh and decided he would do something about these terrible people. He turned to his prophet Dove son of faithfulness, and sent him to save these people.

Jonah paid the fare and instead of heading north and east to Nineveh he headed south to Joppa and west to Tarshish. Tarshish was the most westerly point of the known world at the time probably in Southern Spain. He was going to Timbuktu, the edge of the world.

He is the only prophet who runs away from God and in the story the only person who runs from God. He is not running because he is scared. He knows how gracious and compassionate the Lord is and that he would find a way to bring grace and mercy to his enemies and he did not want this to happen. To be the prophet who saved Israel's enemies would not make him popular with his people.

### **The nature and psychology of disobedience**

Obedience is not a positive idea today in the western church. It sounds like we better submit to God or else. We need a biblical vision of God and not a secular one. God is not the judge or school master or tyrant he is our loving heavenly Father. The way that God works in the world is through his covenant people. Jonah is invited to enter into God's story to display that love.

In our own lives we have a competing vision with God about what is good for us and what 'the good life' looks like. We do what makes sense to us even when we know God would prefer we did the opposite. The question we must ask ourselves is. "Am I going to walk in my life or God's?"

Jonah is facing this challenge. We see a very clear example where he is being called to change. Instead of dealing with his little vision of God he tries to run from life.

We see this behaviour in children running to what they want. We have seen this, or done it ourselves, parents of toddlers running to rescue their children. "Stop" they cry, "Come back here." At first the child slows down but then rethinks and his vision overrides his parents command. He is running for the good life for his betterment, but he may run across a busy road.

God wants Jonah to be involved in this amazing event. When Jesus calls us to follow him we have to let our vision die because his life is much better than ours. God only has your best in view. Christianity is letting my vision die and letting Jesus' vision take over. Let go of your life and vision and start living God's vision.

Is there some part of your life you are fleeing to Tarshish, running from God? God's extravagant love and grace is following you.

## Lesson Three

### Spiritual apathy

I'm sure we can all identify with the situation when we do things by routine and our mind checks out. We can complete an activity and apparently lose our memory. Suddenly we are brought back to the moment and we realise we were awake but not conscious of what we were doing.

Our Christian life can become like that. Once alive in life with God. But now we are cruising. We live from day to day with God but nothing much happens. We are moving in the same direction on automatic pilot. We have lost the vitality of our relationship with God. He is still there but by a series of small decisions we are asleep at the wheel. A picture of spiritual apathy.

### God loves the Ninevites

The condition of the hearts of the Ninevites is clear for all to see but God loves them. God can see what they are doing, that is why he sends his servant to speak to them. Jonah flees in the opposite direction but God pursues him with little mercy. The storm he sends to capture his runaway is so violent the ship threatened to break up into pieces. The force of the storm matches God's fierce love for the Ninevites.

The sailors, wide awake, are throwing the cargo overboard, destroying their very livelihood, and praying to different kinds of gods hoping one of them will relent. They know this is no ordinary storm and that one of them must have done something really terrible to awaken his god to such an angry response.

What is Jonah doing? He is sleeping. Below deck deep in the ship, he is in a deep sleep. The language here is very obvious. "He went down to Joppa." He had gone down below deck. "He lay down and fell into a deep sleep." He had descended into spiritual slumber. His sin had led him to this state. Jonah runs from his task he thinks he knows better than God. His sin has made him like this. He is blissfully unaware of what is going on, an image of what is happening on the inside of him.

Who is suffering as a result of his bad decisions? The sailors. He is a 'wrecking ball' of all the people around him. A profound image of the influence of sin. Our morality our personal decisions affect those around us. In this age we say, "I can do what I like as long as it doesn't affect others." BUT IT DOES! Eventually, all these little moral decisions will build up and affect people. Thousands of small compromises affect those around us and lead to our own spiritual decline.

The captain wakes him up and urges him to call on his god. The prophet is reminded to pray by the pagan. Then the sailors decide to cast lots. Ancient dice rolling to determine the will of the gods. It works and Jonah wins the lottery. It tells them who is responsible for the calamity. They ask him what work he does. Where he comes from. What is his country and where are his people. His response is "I'm a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." No! He does not worship God, if he did he would fear him and do what his Lord asked him to do. His words are a direct contradiction of what he is doing. A deeply hypocritical man.

## The mirror of God's word

What is happening here? A mirror is being held up to all who hear this story. We can all think we are superior to Jonah but after all we are just like him. On his answer the sailors are deeply afraid. They can see it is this man who has seriously offended his god. People outside of God can often see more clearly the obvious contradiction between what we say we believe and what we do. Jonah is a very imperfect witness. Does this limit God? Does it stop God in using Jonah? In the same way, God uses us despite our imperfections.

## Jonah's last desperate effort to escape

The sailors ask Jonah what they are to do. He suggests they kill him by throwing him overboard. This can mean two things. (1) This is what I deserve, or (2) I would rather die than obey God." A further hardening of the heart. The sailors think this is a terrible idea. They make further efforts to escape the storm by rowing back to land but God makes the storm even wilder. They recognise there is only one God and cry out to him not to hold them accountable for killing an innocent man. Taking Jonah they throw him into the sea! Once overboard the sea grows calm. A clear sign to them that God is appeased. At this they greatly fear God. Jonah said that he did but he didn't. Back on land they offer sacrifices to God. Even when we are incapable God can still save people.

## The greatest tragedy in chapter one

God is doing amazing things around Jonah but he is so tuned into himself he misses all of it. Spiritual apathy will tune us out of what God is doing. Will Jonah ever wake up? All of a sudden he is very alive and very awake. He can't go any further to the bottom. In this story he hits the bottom and the instrument of death swallows him up.

## God's vehicle of grace

The moment of death becomes the moment of his new birth. This instrument of death becomes a vehicle of grace to give him life. He gets a second chance. Can you sense the gospel here? This is why Jesus appeals to this moment in the story to describe himself in Matthew chapter 12.

***Matthew 12 38-40 "Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." He answered. "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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."***

Israel cannot go any deeper in their rebellion and God meets them right there in their brokenness. Death is turned into new life. Jesus is the antitype of Jonah, one that is foreshadowed by an earlier type. The world is like it is so Jesus dies for us. His death becomes our vehicle of life. Opportunity to be a new and different person. And this is what is happening to Jonah. Jonah is living on pure grace. He can do nothing to save himself, something is done to him. At the place where he meets his own death is where God meets with him.



The place of grace

This is good news

God's grace happens to him

We are a community of people who are trying to wake up and realise God has done something for us.

We are waking up to the fact we are helpless.

## Lesson Four

### Inside the fish

#### Chapter two overview

Cramped in the stomach of this beast Jonah utters a prayer, but he never technically says he's sorry. But he does thank God for not abandoning him and he promises he will obey God from this point no matter what. And God's response is quite comical, the great fish vomits Jonah back onto dry land.

#### The comical story continues

From the inside of the fish Jonah is not dead. What is he doing? He is composing a beautiful intricate Hebrew poem that represents his prayer to God. How strange! No oxygen there, what kind of story is this? There are two views (1). It is a historic event and the story comes from Jonah himself. (2). The author expects us to see this story as a parable. He has taken a historical figure and placed him in a parable setting. All agree that the story is written in comic book style with over the top type characters. Everyone is opposite to their stereotypes in the way they behave and everything is big and intense. Whatever your view it is a crazy story and you are supposed to say what is happening here?

#### A great fish

Let's fixate on the fish in this lesson. What does the author expect us to see in this moment of the story? There are two steps then and now.

- (1) How would those who first heard it have interpreted it and what would it have meant to them?
- (2) What does it mean to us today?

We read a lot of the bible and don't get it. Then we read a verse that we like and pick it out like a promise box. If we do this we can make the Bible say almost anything.

The first rule in reading the Bible is context. To know what this story means you must first know the context in which the story was told. The story or a sentence in the story can have many meanings depending on the context.

#### How the first hearers interpreted the story

Jonah is a prophet - that is the context. God brings Israel out of captivity. He gives them the Torah, the book of law, which tells them how to live in covenant with him. He wants them to be a witness to the nations but they don't do too well in living in covenant with God. This is where the prophets step into the scene. Israel turn away from God creating idols to worship and this leads to sin in their lives.

**Hosea 8: 1-4. “Put the trumpet to your lips! An eagle is over the house of the Lord because the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law. Israel cries out to me, “O our God, we acknowledge you!” But Israel has rejected what is good; an enemy will pursue him. They set up kings without my consent; they choose princes without my approval. With silver and gold they make idols for themselves to their own destruction.”**

**Hosea 8: 8-10. “Israel is swallowed up; now she is among the nations like a worthless thing. For they have gone up to Assyria like a wild donkey wandering alone. Ephraim has sold herself to lovers. Although they have sold themselves among the nations, I will now gather them together. They will begin to waste away under the oppression of the mighty king.”**

Look at the metaphors and the poetry. “Israel is swallowed up.”

**Jeremiah 51: 34. “Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon has devoured us, he has thrown us into confusion, he has made us an empty jar. Like a serpent he has swallowed us and filled his stomach with our delicacies and then has spewed us out.”**

God has allowed this beast to come and swallow up his people.

**Psalm 124: 4-5. “The raging waters would have swept us away. Praise be to the Lord, who has not let us be torn by their teeth.”**

A very common way for the prophets and psalmist to speak of drowning or being swallowed up. The writer of Jonah turns those into a narrative. He lives this whole story. This is what the first hearers would have heard. They would have said, “This is our story.” Down in the ship, down into sleep, down into the sea, in the belly of the fish a picture of being trapped. Trapped in sin, in pain, in confusion. We are here in a mess of our own making. What can we do when we are here? We pray through the hardship and suffering. This image of being swallowed up by the enemy is very powerful.

Not all end up in the belly of a fish because of their own action. Daniel ended up in Babylon because of his parents sin and selfishness. Joseph is sold into slavery and eventual imprisonment as the result of his wicked brothers and Potiphar’s wife. Is God responsible for their sin. No! God I not the author of these circumstances while at the same time he is not surprised and it fits into his providence. God works all these things out redemptively for his purposes. God is not responsible for the circumstances but he is present. God is with them but will not be the genie in a bottle to get them out of their problems. This is called God’s severe mercy, we will look at this in more detail in our next lesson.

### **Did Jonah die while he was in the belly of the fish?**

Those who accept the literal account of Jonah take one of two views regarding what happened to Jonah during his time in the belly of the great fish. One view holds that Jonah died and later returned to life. The second view holds that Jonah remained alive for three days in the belly of the great fish. Both views agree on a literal reading of the book of Jonah and affirm God’s supernatural ability to rescue his prophet.

Those who argue that Jonah died and later rose again appeal to Jonah prayer.

***Jonah 2:2. "He said: "In my distress I called to the Lord and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listen to my cry."***

The use of Sheol, the Hebrew term for "the grave," could mean that Jonah actually died. Yet the words "the depths of the grave," seen as a poetic turn of phrase, could easily refer to an agonising or horrifying experience.

There is another reason that some argue for Jonah's death and resurrection: ***Jesus said, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a large fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."***

The reason is that, since Jesus' death and resurrection were actual, then Jonah must have also actually died and later returned to life. The Bible does not explicitly state that Jonah died in the belly of the great fish. Those who theorise that he did die rely on influence and speculation.

What is the evidence that Jonah stayed alive for the three days and nights in the fish? First that Jonah prayed from inside the fish. At the very least he lived long enough to offer his prayer.

Second, the language of Jonah's prayer is poetic in nature. Terms such as Sheol and the reference to "the pit" do not have to be interpreted so literally as to require physical death.

Did Jonah die in the fish, or was he alive the whole time? Either interpretation is possible, but the traditional understanding is that Jonah was alive for three days and emerged from the murky depths to reluctantly take God's message to the Ninevites.

## Lesson Five

### Jonah's prayer

#### God's severe mercy

This next bit is hard for Christians to understand. Most of us have the default assumption that we invited God into our lives to give us smooth passage to our destination. Stories like this and particularly God testing Abraham should be enough to shatter our illusion. God is not here to make us happy, that's just not true.

#### What should this story mean to us today?

When tragedy hits because of our own sin or somebody else's, it's then, like Jonah, we get our focus back on God. ***"In my distress I called to the Lord." "I called for help, and you listened to my cry."*** God can never abandon us but it's in the midst of a crisis we have an heightened awareness of God's presence restored.

***"You hurled me into the deep." "Your waves and breakers swept over me."***

Whose waves? Who hurled him? It was not the sailors it was God. This is a hard pill for Jonah to swallow. He sees God's hand in it and has to acknowledge the responsibility for the mess he finds himself in is of his very own making.

Our experiences is God showing us what we are like and how he moulds and shapes us. We make poor captains of our own ship because we sail it to our advantage caring little of how it affects others. In God's severe mercy he may deal with us in a way that brings us to an end of ourselves. We might dislike him for it but it might be the best thing that ever happens to us to discover how broken and selfish we are. It brings us to a place of dependence and humility.

There is no sin of our own or somebody else that is beyond God's redemptive reach that he will not use to shape us in a deep, deep way. And that is his highest priority to conform us into the image of his Son. You might get tossed overboard in the process but God knows what he is doing.

In verse 4 Jonah is speaking to himself. I thought I got what I wanted a smooth passage to Tarshish. But then he sees where it got him. It is then he realises and we see a shift in his priorities. The thought of going to Tarshish, being his own God, the captain of his ship now seems the worst thing possible. He almost got what he wanted - to be banished from God's sight, but he turns and looks back to God's temple and now it seems very attractive. He sees running from what he thinks is a kill joy. God is actually the God of mercy who was chasing him all the time.

We will all realise one day that getting what we want is not going to give us life. That's why you can't convince people to come to Christ when all is going well in their life. But, be there for them when their ship goes down then all of a sudden Jesus looks attractive, he realises he desperately needs God. He is going down and down. The images seem to be irreversible; engulfing waters, choked by seaweed, sinking to the base of the

mountain, barred in forever. But then God brings him up. This experience stripped away the clutter in his life. The only thing he knows is that God is committed to him. Left to his own devices who knows where he is going to end up. This is the worst experience you can have and at the same time the best.

Eventually he has turned the corner - he is emerging with gratefulness. Now he is having a positive experience. But where is he? Still in the belly of the beast.

When you discover all you have is God's faithfulness to you. You realise your life is not your own, it doesn't belong to you.

We look at life's circumstances as indicators to how God feels about us. Our circumstances have nothing to do with God's commitment to us. They are not a reliable indicator of God's feelings or commitment to us.

We look to one place only for that. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus. His life, death and resurrection was personally for each one of us.

You come to the place where Jonah was.

You end up like Paul and Silas in prison where everything is bad, they might end up being executed. But they are singing. Their lives no longer belong to them. And if this is God's severe mercy to them their lives are in his hand.

The idol that Jonah prays about in verse 8 is him charting his own course, he idolised his own autonomy from God. So he starts to shout praises to God and this brings a song of thanksgiving from him. ***"In the place of severe mercy I will trust him."***

It is in the belly of the beast that God does profound things in our lives.

## Lesson Six

### Jonah is recommissioned

#### Chapter three overview

So once again God commissions Jonah to preach again in Nineveh and Jonah complies. We are told that Nineveh was a gigantic city. It would take days to walk through. So Jonah gets one day in and here is his message. ***Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.*** It's five words in Hebrew. Now his sermon is very short and it's also odd. Look at what is missing, there is no mention of what the Ninevites have done wrong or what they should do to respond. No mention of who might overturn them and most noticeable, there is no mention of God. What's going on here? Has Jonah intentionally given the bare minimum of information. It's like he is trying to sabotage his own message or ensure the Ninevites destruction. There is just no effort on Jonah's part here. Whatever his motives are the plan does not work because no sooner does he utter the five word sermon that the King of Nineveh, the entire city including all its cows repent in sorrow and ashes. So for the second time these evil pagans show themselves to be more responsive than God's own prophet. So God forgives the Ninevites and does not bring destruction on the city. Now here is the brilliant part of the story the last word of Jonah's short sermon 'overturned' means just that 'turned over' and it can refer to a city being overturned and destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah but it can also be used of something being transformed like turned over and changed into its opposite. And so comically Jonah's words actually came true but not in the way he intended. Nineveh does get turned over as Jonah's enemies repent and find God's mercy.

#### God's reluctant servant

***“Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.”*** This was a new concept for him. He is going on the Lord's terms. It was a large city it says it took three days to visit it. Archaeologists who have dug up Nineveh report that at its peak its walls were 7 3/4 miles in circumference. It would have only taken an hour or less to walk right across the city.

Jonah goes one day into the city and proclaims his message. Eight words in English, five words in Hebrew. A very strange message, it has only two points in it. They have forty days to repent and if they fail to do this the city will be overturned. You would think he might say something about God, their wickedness and what they should do about it. After all the prophetic word always offered a way of escape. We get none of this from Jonah.

There are two ways people have understood this strange five word sermon. (1) Another extreme crazy element of the story. (2) Jonah is engaging in a bit of prophetic sabotage.

No one in this story behaves according to their stereotype. This is a very evil city and people are going to stumble over themselves to repent after one days sermon. And it was really bad preaching. Consider how long it took Jonah to repent and the extremes God had to go to. The worst people on earth are so ready to repent just like the sailors.

Does Jonah want them to repent? Why did he run from God in the first place? It's not because he is afraid it's because he hates the Ninevites. He thinks the world would be a better place without them. Could it be he is physically obeying God but gives as little information as possible to ensure they won't be able to repent and find forgiveness? Would this be consistent with Jonah's character? Absolutely!

The author doesn't make it clear. You are drawn into the story to contemplate his motives. Regardless of sabotage or not his sermon works. The Ninevites believe. It should read the Ninevites believed Jonah but it doesn't. It says the Ninevites believed God. This is crazy, this is insane, this is the worst city on earth and they all repent, and their repentance is genuine, they express their belief through their actions.

### **What does it mean to believe?**

In the west when we say we believe we mean we give something mental ascent. A mental activity. Yes I believe. Move on. We have taken this mental idea of believing and imposed it onto the Bible. The Scriptures in this story are trying to redefine the whole concept of believing judgement and repentance for us.

What do these people believe about God. They are filling the gaps that Jonah left out. They believe God is rendering a judgement upon them. Before Jonah appeared they thought it was fine to be part of this empire, that growing and expanding through its brilliance and brutality was normal. But now they are facing the judgement of God what they thought was good now they know it is actually wrong.

Now they are put in a place of trust. They can believe their own definition of what is right and wrong or they can accept this new judgement on what they are doing and realise they made something evil into something good. And so they believed and expressed it by their response.

In the Bible belief is the active response of the other side of your life that shows what you believe. This is important for us westerners to hear because we have created a tick box culture. Do you believe - yes. Have you prayed - yes. Then you are a believer. But there might not be one shred of evidence that you do actually believe in Jesus.

If there is no shred of evidence of anything happening on the inside of you, there is no evidence you are saved. This is a very positive thing. No one is doing you any favours letting you think you are a Christian if you are not. Belief is a holistic life response.

### **What does it mean to repent?**

The Hebrew word for 'returning to God' is 'shuv'. The English translation is to turn around, or change direction or to repent.

When a judgement is rendered. "You are going the wrong way". You turn and go the other way. Prophets picked up on this metaphor. If you are going the wrong way in life it will end in ruin. Stop, turn around and walk in the right direction.



The King in Nineveh not only believed in the God of Israel he repented and trusted that God would turn from his fierce anger so that he would not perish. In our culture we wrestle with the concept of God's wrath, his anger, and his judgement. This passage is about God's judgement on human behaviour and peoples need to turn around. This is not a popular subject divine judgement and repentance, but they are foundational doctrines of the Christian faith.

### **Balancing love and judgement**

How do we reconcile these two characteristics of God? Often we screen one out in favour of the other. When we try to hold the two concepts usually one trumps the other. The biggest trap we fall into is thinking they are opposites.

When God looks out on our world he sees we are seriously messed up. Why is it like that? 7 billion people are making millions of decisions every day that are self orientated, that's what makes the world what it is.

If God, when he looks out on the world, seeing how we treat each other said because I love them I will just overlook it. We would say No! That's not love that's apathy.

When we see sin and injustice the loving thing is to do something about it. To render judgement on injustice is the only way to stop it. Judgement then is an expression of love. If God doesn't judge sin he is not acting in love. If there is not a God of judgement here is no hope for our world.

We are accountable to God. It does matter how we believe. God must define what is good and evil and judge accordingly.

Cherish the hope of the story of Scripture of a world made right. Of restored creation where all wrong ways are made right. Cherish the hope of a judgement. Everything done wrong being named and made right.

If God is the judge of good and evil I don't get to choose. Judgement is a question of trust and belief. I mustn't be two faced. I must trust God's judgement and not justify my actions.

In the last verse of this chapter, we see the goal of God's judgement. When they turned he had compassion and did not destroy them. He relented. The moment we turn we find or meet God's grace. Judgement is to restore people to himself.

Earlier we read the King got up from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. We too have to keep getting up from the throne and sit in ashes. We must humble ourselves or there is no change.

## Lesson Seven

### Jonah's anger

#### Chapter four overview

The final chapter brings all the pieces together. Jonah is fuming mad and he utters this second prayer. He first tells God why he ran away in chapter one. It was not because he was afraid rather it was because he knew God was so merciful and this is great. Jonah actually quotes God's own description of himself from the Book of Exodus and he throws it back in God's face as an insult. He said he knew that God was compassionate and would find some way to forgive these horrible Ninevites. You can hear the disgust in Jonah's voice. Jonah then cuts off the conversation and he prays that God would kill him on the spot. He would rather die than live with a God who forgives his enemies. Fortunate for Jonah God does not comply and simply asks if Jonah's anger is justified.

Jonah ignores the question and goes outside of the city to camp on a nearby hill to see what might happen. The Ninevites might repent of their repentance and get roasted after all. What happens next is very odd. God provides this vine plant to shade him from the sun and this makes him quite happy. But then God sends a tiny worm to eat up the plant and so Jonah loses his shade and there in the heat of the sun Jonah asks again that God kill him. So God again asks if Jonah's anger is justified. And Jonah barks back absolutely just let me die. And these are Jonah's last words in the story. God's final words are what concludes the book. He says that this whole vine incident was an attempt to get through to Jonah.

Jonah got all concerned and emotional over this vine which he only enjoyed for a day and God asked Jonah, aren't humans a bit more valuable than vines. I mean isn't it OK if God might feel the same concern for Nineveh that's full of thousands of people who have lost their way and also the cows and that is how the book ends. With God asking Jonah for permission to show mercy to his enemies. And what is Jonah's answer? The story does not say because that is not the point.

#### Jonah's response to God's mercy

Jonah is livid with anger. To Jonah it's all very wrong. He prays to God, and lets him have it. He tells him he knows exactly what he's like, gracious and compassionate and he wants God to take his life now.

In verse two he describes God. He is quoting from *Exodus 34:6* “ ***The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.***” Israel exists because God is like this. If he were not, there would be no Israel.

He is so angry with God because God is being too kind and gracious, how crazy! He is this comical ridiculous figure. We have no sympathy for him and we are laughing at him.

This is the scandal of the liberality of God's grace 'the dark side of God'. We are happy that he is like this with us but we are angry when he is like that to the people we despise. They don't deserve it! Jonah's motivation is understandable to us. God will now try three times to bring him around to his way of thinking.

### God's first attempt

In verse 4 God says to Jonah let's talk about this. Is it right that you are angry because I show mercy to the Ninevites? Is that legitimate Jonah? Jonah's response is he ignores God. He sits down, then he makes a shelter and looks to see what will happen to the city. This is not the first time in the story he ignored God. He is angry because God has played a trick on him. In chapter 3 God told him to tell the people the city will be overturned. Jonah thought this meant God would destroy the city but what God intended was the city would turn over, the Ninevites would be transformed. What Jonah intended for evil God intended for good.

### God's second attempt

Seeing Jonah's discomfort God provides a vine to protect him from the hot sun. For the first time in the story Jonah is happy. It's just a leafy plant but it's something that gives him shade. But the next day God provides a tiny worm to eat the plant. When the scorching sun rose the plant was destroyed and Jonah suffered again. Again he wished to die.

God then asks him the same question again with a little twist to it. ***"Is it right for you to be angry about a plant?"*** Is your anger unto death about a plant legitimate? Good question this should shake him out of his irrational response. At this point Jonah is beyond reason. But God does not give up. He is gracious, slow to anger, compassionate and abounding in loving kindness. He is committed to Jonah, he is going to work this out.

### God's third attempt

Listen Jonah you have been concerned about this plant. You have shown extreme emotion about it both happy and sad. You didn't care for the plant. You didn't make it grow. You can't claim any emotional attachment to it because it came up overnight and died overnight. It hasn't been in your life for very long. So let's say your emotions for this plant are legitimate. Should I not have the same emotions in turn for something a little more significant? Like a huge city full of 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left and also many animals.

Here the story ends and we close the book. But what does that last question of God mean?

In God's first attempt he tries to expose how foolish it is that Jonah is angry about Nineveh. Then in his second attempt he does the same thing with the plant exposing his anger about the plant. For the first time in the story Jonah cares about something else and not himself. Yes it does provide comfort for him but there is a little corner of his heart that cares about something more than himself and God says we can work with that.

Okay you have a soft spot in your heart for this little plant. It is ridiculous but you are thinking about something else more than yourself. Can't you understand and grant me that I should be concerned about something a little more significant, a vast number of people who cannot tell their right hand from their left.

This does not mean they don't know their right from the left because God clearly expects them to know that. They were lost and misguided. When they should go to the right they went to the left and when they should go to the left they went to the right. A usual description of human beings in the Bible we are like stupid sheep. God is not excusing the awful things they were doing. They were accountable but lost and misguided.

God has the last word and Jonah gives no reply.

## Lesson Eight

### A book about you

#### The point of the book

The point is the Book is trying to mess with you. And God's questions were actually addressed to you the reader. Are you OK that God loves your enemies? So this book holds a mirror up to the one who reads it. In Jonah we see the worst parts of our own character magnified which should generate humility and gratitude that God would love his enemies and put up with the Jonah in all of us.

And so this strange story actually becomes a message of good news about the wideness of God's mercy that should challenge us to the core and that's the message of Jonah.

#### The scandal of God's grace

This book is not about Jonah it's about you. How am I living in response to God's questions? Jonah is this ridiculous character who grasps the scandal of God's grace. And that God loves his enemies as much as he loves you. And when that sinks in when you are struggling with all your issues of forgiveness this story packs a punch.

The Ninevites are the most horrible people but in the story of Jonah who is the most hard hearted hateful person? God is gently trying to help us see what's happening. We are part of the covenant people of God but we are just as hard hearted and broken like Jonah. God loves our enemies and he wants us to do just the same. This is a core issue at the heart of the Gospel. In **Luke 6: 27-28** Jesus put it this way.

***“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.”***

Very noble and admirable but are we going to do it? This is how God planned us to live. Fully reconciled to God and fully reconciled to all people.

Jonah you don't get to stand on the high ground and decide who gets God's grace and who doesn't. We have all made ourselves enemies of God. We are waking up to that fact. We all have stories of where we have hurt, wounded and caused others pain, and been wounded ourselves. But if there is one place where all this hurting one another stops it is at the cross.

The communion of people who are called to live around the cross must live differently. Not because we are better but because we have been shown grace and compassion.

What chapter 4 does is the same thing Jesus does in his teaching. He deconstructs what an enemy is. As with Jonah we see the enemy as the bad guy when we are the bad guy.

It's all right to struggle with people who are toxic. Our problem is we tend to only see in the person the bad they did and reduce them down to that. We reduce their

humanity to their problem. A person who told lies about you becomes a liar. We then paint ourselves as the opposite and we are blind to our own condition.

We are all contributors to why the world is as bad as it is and we all contribute in a different way. The line of good and evil goes through each one of us and that is the point of the cross. The ground is level at the cross and it is there we all receive grace and mercy.

The story is not about God and Nineveh but God and his own people. He is trying to show his own people how messed up they are. How much they need his grace like everybody else. He has brought Jonah into contact with his enemy because he wants to teach him something.

Do you have someone difficult in your life? And you say, "If that person were not there it would be so much easier to follow Jesus." Could it be that person is in your life by divine invitation for you to grow and mature in your experience of God's grace? Not just mentally ascending to God's grace but letting it flow through you.

Loving our enemies is seeing the common brokenness in all of us. Make a list of your enemies' bad points. Then ask yourself have I ever done these things to others.

Could it be that this person is invited into your life that you might understand the deep love and grace that God is extending to you?

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