



Unit .14

Session .01

A Rebellious People Receive Mercy

Scripture



Jonah 1:1-4,17; 2:10—3:5,10; 4:1,8-11

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, **2** “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” **3** But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. **4** But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. ... **17** And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. ... **10** And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. **1** Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, **2** “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” **3** So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. **4** Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey.

And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” **5** And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. ... **10** When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. ... **1** But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ... **8** When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” **9** But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” **10** And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. **11** And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

Intro Options



Main Point:
God's grace can extend
to even those we
consider enemies.

Option 1

If you grew up in church, it is likely that you heard a story about a man being swallowed by a large fish but lived to tell the tale. But for many people, the book of Jonah seems more like a fairy tale.

- Do we really believe that God sent a storm upon a boat and that the sailors were so desperate for the storm to stop that they tossed a man into the sea?
- Is it truly plausible that a giant fish came by at just the right time and swallowed him but somehow didn't bite him or kill him with stomach acid? And three days later spat him on a beach?

Do we believe in miracles? We should, for if God can speak the universe into existence then none of the miracles in the Bible would be too difficult for Him. But ironically, the most miraculous part of Jonah's story isn't the fact that a large fish swallowed him and he somehow lived. The part that should overwhelm us with awe, wonder, and shock is that a great and holy God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, has mercy on sinners. Jonah, the sailors, and the Ninevites—these are the people whom God pursued, a God who is intent on working in the hearts of rebels like them and turning them into worshipers.

- **When you think about your own salvation story, does it still seem miraculous to you that God pursued and rescued you?**

Option 2

The story of Jonah is pretty well known. He was a prophet, convinced his own opinion was the correct one, and so opposed to God's direction that he ran as far away from the will and reach of God as possible. But this story is less about a man running from God than it is about a God willing to pursue humanity in our disobedience.

While we tend to focus on the prophet when we tell the story of Jonah, the main character in the Book of Jonah is God Himself. While Jonah was vindictive, God was merciful. While Jonah ran away, God pursued. While Jonah was angry, God was forgiving. God was pursuing the wicked Ninevites, but He also pursued the disobedient prophet.

- **Have you ever felt like you were running from God's plan and purposes? Why might we do that? What could we do to embrace God's plan and purposes instead?**

TEACHING PLAN

The story of Jonah is perhaps one of the most well-known and often told stories of the Bible. And while Jonah played a vital role in his own story, the main character of the story is God and the plot is His unwavering pursuit of both Jonah and the Ninevites whom Jonah despised.



Read Jonah 1:1-4,17.



When the word of God came to Jonah to preach a message to Nineveh, he ran. This command of God came to his ears, but his heart's response was rebellion—he did not want to do what God commanded him to do. Jonah, like every Ninevite, was an idolater. His status as an Israelite, his calling as a prophet, his previous acts of obedience—none of these made it easy for him to obey this command of God to go to a people who were the enemy of God's people. Jonah would rather leave his home and sail for the ends of the earth than obey God by preaching salvation to a wicked people who would gladly kill him and all of his peers.

Jonah was a sinner. Jonah was in need of a Savior. And God was able to remind Jonah of these truths before he arrived at Nineveh. When it comes to rebelling against God, both Jonah and the Ninevites were guilty and in need of the pursuit of God's grace.



- **Has God ever called you to go somewhere or do something you found difficult to obey? What did He ask of you? How did you respond?**
- **After reading about Jonah's response, what do you think you can do to avoid making the same mistake in your own life?**

Apparently, the belly of a great fish is a fine place to reevaluate your priorities, because it served as that kind of environment for Jonah. Ironically, Jonah found himself in the exact same position as the Ninevites. He was disobedient, living in the middle of God's discipline, and he needed to repent and ask for forgiveness. He had to, in a sense, preach the message to himself that God had given him for the Ninevites. And when he applied the message to himself, he was thankful for the same gracious character of God in his own life. Jonah 2:7 recorded part of Jonah's prayer from inside the fish.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 40, DDG)

God is Merciful

Mercy refers to God's compassion and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin (Eph. 2:4-5; Titus 3:5). Both mercy and grace are undeserved, meaning humanity can do nothing to earn God's mercy and grace. If one could, then it would no longer be the free gift of mercy or grace.



COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God's grace can extend
to even those we
consider enemies.

Jonah 1

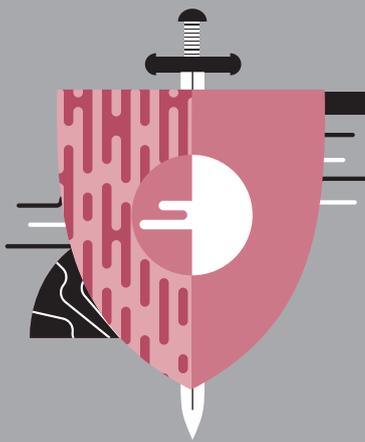
1-4. For years, Jonah had faithfully served God as a prophet in Israel. But suddenly, God's new message came and the immediate response we see from Jonah was one of disobedience. But why was Jonah so adamantly against God's command? Jonah's disobedience wasn't because he was afraid that he would travel all the way to Nineveh, preach to an evil people, and that no one would repent; his fear was tied to believing that God would actually spare such evil people.

Nineveh was known for its vicious and violent ways. They would kill and skin their enemies, then display the bodies as a warning to any who would oppose them. In many ways the Assyrians were the Israelites' sworn enemy. To obey God's will in this situation would not only have been dangerous to Jonah's own well-being, but to his reputation as the prophet of Israel as well. What would the Israelites say if Jonah went to extend grace to a people who had killed their fathers and children? Though Jonah had a track record of obeying many of God's previous commands, he had now come face to face with a command that he was unwilling to follow.

Jonah knew God well enough to realize God was gracious, compassionate, and full of mercy. Furthermore, he knew God was giving the Ninevites forty days of warning, inviting them to repent. Jonah could see how this would play out—he would go to Nineveh, he would speak the word of the Lord, the people would repent, and God would forgive them. No judgment. No destruction. Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites bound him from sharing the message of God with them.

But just as God was unwilling to give up on the Ninevites, He was also unwilling to let Jonah go his own way. God pursued Jonah even as the prophet ran, and the means of that pursuit was a mighty storm. The storm God "hurled" into the sea was so terrible that the hardened sailors suddenly turned very religious. There are no atheists on ships in a God-sized storm!

In Defense (p. 42, DDG)



Lots of people, upon reading or hearing the book of Jonah, get caught up with the likelihood of some of the particular details within the story—mainly that of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish and being kept alive during that time. Because of that, some wonder if the story of Jonah is actually a true, historic account of the prophet or more of an allegory or parable used to illustrate biblical truth. Two things to consider in this discussion: 1) one can't outright reject the historic nature of these events solely on the grounds that miracles don't happen. There are many reasons to believe in the existence of miracles in light of the Christian worldview and the historic record preserved in the Bible. To say these things can't take place is a much stronger claim than saying they didn't take place—either of which is going to require a tremendous amount of support to uphold. 2) It is important to note that Jesus believed that Jonah was a historic figure who lived out these historic events (Matt. 12:39-41). In fact, Jesus makes the connection between the physical experience of Jonah inside the fish with His own imminent experiencing of being inside the tomb for three days and nights. Many argue that such a connection only makes sense if Jonah's experience was real history.

TEACHING PLAN

After Jonah repented, it is as if the story started over again. Jonah was again given the same command to go and preach to Nineveh.

Read Jonah 2:10–3:5,10.



Maybe Jonah thought after all that he had been through that God would let him off the hook and move on to another messenger. Yet, in His mercy, God invited Jonah a second time to participate in the great work that He would do in Nineveh. God is a God of second chances, and His forgiveness and mercy should motivate us toward greater obedience. When God once again spoke to Jonah, His command was the same: Get up. Go to Nineveh and preach. God and His command did not change; Jonah, instead, had to change.

- **Do you think it was difficult for Jonah to find himself in need of the same repentance God sought from the Ninevites? Why or why not?**
- **When have you disobeyed a call from God but later received a second chance to obey and participate in His work?**

When Jonah finally arrived, there were no clever illustrations or sermon props he used. Instead, he simply pronounced God's judgment. Miraculously, the message was incredibly effective. Jonah went throughout the city preaching his message. Afterward, people in Nineveh had been cut to the core by the proclamation of their destruction and turned to God. As evidence of their repentance, the king declared a state of extreme fasting. The city turned to God with all their might, even including their animals in their fast.

- **Does it surprise you that Jonah's simple message was effective? Why or why not?**

Read Jonah 4:1,8-11.



Jonah would be a nice and tidy book if it wrapped up at the end of chapter 3. The rebellious prophet repented, the wicked city repented. Tie it up with a nice neat bow. But rarely is that the story of our lives. Often times by God's grace, we repent and obey, but the hardness and the sinfulness of our hearts that we thought were dealt with comes roaring back. We often find ourselves dealing with the same sin patterns once again. This is seen in Jonah, but we also see God's continued pursuit of him. God wasn't simply trying to get Jonah to accomplish a missionary task; He was after Jonah's heart.

Jonah's story isn't unlike our own. However, in our scenario, we play the role of the enemies of God. In fact, our story is that we were the enemies of God, but God appointed another Messenger to come to us to preach repentance. Someone better than Jonah came and declared God's message of repentance and forgiveness. This Messenger bent Himself fully to the will of God, though it cost Him His life. He was also swallowed up for three days and three nights, not by a fish, but by the grave. Then He emerged victorious. Jesus is the better Jonah, and we are the enemies who have been granted forgiveness because of Him.



COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God's grace can extend
to even those we
consider enemies.

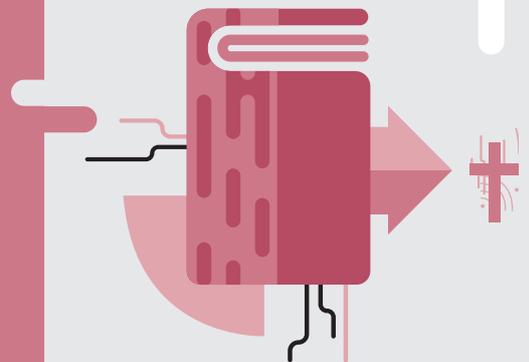
Jonah 3–4

3:4-5. This was the sermon delivered by Jonah: “In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!” Only five words in Hebrew. Yet, at this simple message, the city of Nineveh repented—rich and poor, young and old. Even the king stepped down from his throne, removed his robe, and repented. While the words were few, two critical components were clear. First, “Nineveh will be demolished”—God had seen the depth of their wickedness and He would no longer bear it. Judgment would come. The justice of God demanded that sin be punished. But Jonah also said, “In forty days.” There was time to repent. Though the city deserved immediate destruction, God revealed that He’s not only just but also merciful and forgiving. Mercy was needed because judgment was coming. God hates sin and seeks to destroy it, and at the same time, He loves sinners and seeks to reconcile them to himself. He is slow to anger; He is quick to forgive.

4:8-11. Throughout the Book of Jonah, God sovereignly used various pieces of creation to work on Jonah’s heart. When Jonah fled to Tarshish, God hurled a storm upon the sea that tossed the ship so that it could no longer sail. When lots were cast to determine who was guilty, the decision belonged to the Lord, and Jonah was exposed in his disobedience. While Jonah was sinking in the ocean, God sent a fish to swim over to Jonah and swallow him. He wasn’t chewed or digested but remained alive for three days and nights until God commanded the fish to vomit him on a beach. In Jonah’s anger, God raised up a plant and provided shade. Then, He appointed a worm to kill the plant. The astonishing thing is that all of creation fully submitted to God’s Word, except Jonah. All of creation was available to God as He loved, disciplined, and pursued the heart of Jonah. This is no less true today. Every element of this world is available to God and at His disposal as He works out His will in the lives of His people—whether storms and winds or traffic jams and airport delays or sickness and tragedies. God uses all necessary means to bring people to the foot of the cross and align our hearts with His heart. He continues to sovereignly work as He carries out His perfect plan of sanctifying and glorifying a people for Himself.

(p. 41, DDG) Christ Connection

Jonah was a prophet who rejected God’s call, ran from his enemies, and eventually obeyed grudgingly. Jesus followed God’s call, loved His enemies, and obeyed joyfully (Hebrews 12:2). While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.



Our Mission

God's Story has always been designed to connect with our story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own. Suggested answers to these questions can be found on the right-hand side of the page for leaders.

Head



Jonah believed that he had good reasons for his disobedience. When have you been tempted to believe that your disobedience and sin was justified?

What does this story teach us about God's response to His people when they sin? Why should God's character displayed here comfort us?

Heart



What did God want Jonah to realize with His question about Jonah's anger (Jonah 4:4)?

Where in your life do you need to pray and work toward aligning your heart and priorities with God and his priorities?

Hands



Who do you know that God wants to reach? Are you running away from or running toward that person?

What are some ways you think God wants to use you to influence that person for Him?

Main Point: God's grace can extend to even those we consider enemies.



Head

If you are a Christian, whether you have recently come to the faith or have walked with Jesus for years, you will likely encounter something sooner or later in God's Word that will cause you to run rather than obey. You may be able to point to many of God's commands that you are wholeheartedly willing to obey, but God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Eventually, we too will come face to face with a command of God that we will find objectionable and unfair. Like Jonah, we don't disobey God without reason; we will likely have lots of excuses and justifications for why we can't obey. But disobedience with good reasons is still disobedience.

Because God's love for you is like God's love for Jonah, He will not leave you in your disobedience. Like an Olympian skillfully hurling a javelin at his target, God hurled a great storm upon Jonah, not out of punishment but out of loving pursuit. When it comes to disobedience and our running away from God's presence, the biggest thing we ought to fear is not a great storm but a calm and peaceful sea. As long as there is a storm raging to bring us back to obedience and back to God's presence, we can have hope even in the midst of our rebellion. The discipline of Jonah continued and would not let up until he confessed and committed to obey the difficult command of God.



Heart

We can see from Jonah's reaction to the repentance of Nineveh and the circumstances surrounding the plant the condition of his heart: it was contrary to the heart of God. When God saw Nineveh's repentance, He relented from His anger; when Jonah saw this same event, he was greatly displeased and became furious.

The story of Jonah ends abruptly with God posing a question, yet no answer was recorded. But that seems to be the whole point of the ending. It forces us to contemplate our own personal response. The story has no conclusion because it invites us to consider the ending as if we were Jonah. We are the rebellious people God has called in this world to obey His commands. We are the people who regularly run from the call of God and He exposes the sin that lingers in our hearts. We are the people in need of God's great grace to once again turn our hearts to His gospel and have our hearts aligned with His. We are the people of God who have been charged to cross the borders of our lands and enter into foreign territories and cultures with the message of the gospel—that God has provided an escape from judgment for those who repent and believe in Christ. So the book of Jonah closed with an opportunity for us to examine our own lives and hearts and ask: am I going to live according to my will or God's will?



Hands

When we are called to speak the Word of God, we might feel inadequate, afraid, or vulnerable. But the bowing of the mighty city of Nineveh reminds us that God's Word is living, active, and able to cut through to the soul and spirit of mankind. We can speak the Word of God confidently, not because we are gifted speakers, but because of the inherent power present in the gospel message of Jesus Christ.