

Group Study Outline

LAUNCHING

How does it feel to know God is gracious *and* inescapable? Comforting or scary?

QUESTIONS

Read 2 Kings 14:23-27

What do we find out about Jonah here?

What kind of message did he bring?

How would we expect Jonah to react next time God gives him a message?

Read Jonah 1:1-3

What does God tell Jonah to do? (2)

Since Nineveh was a big city in Assyria, Israel's worst enemy, how do you think

Jonah might have felt about this command? How would you have felt?

How did Jonah respond to God's call? (3) Why do you think he did that?

Read Jonah 3:10-4:3

Why does Jonah say he disobeyed God? What was he worried would happen?

How does he feel about the possibility of Nineveh being forgiven?

Would we assume God would forgive the Ninevites based on God's initial

command in 1:2? Why or why not?

What did Jonah know about God that we might have missed?

Read Jonah 1:4-16

How does God react to Jonah's disobedience? (4-5)

What was Jonah up to while this was going on? (5b)

What *wasn't* he doing which the sailors were? (5a, 6)

What is the captain hoping for? (6)

Having been discovered as the culprit, how does Jonah describe himself in 9?

In what way is his answer fairly ridiculous?

What is the crew's reaction? (10) Why do they respond like that?

What is the solution to God's anger shown through the storm? (12, 15)

How do the sailors react to seeing God's judgement averted? (16)

Why do you think they respond like that?

How is their conversion ironic given Jonah's reasons for being on the boat?

Read Jonah 1:17-2:10

Imagine we'd never heard the story of Jonah before. How is this section a surprise given what we've just read in chapter one?

What do we learn about God from these verses?

What are the similarities between Jonah and Jesus? (cf. Matt 12:38-41)

CONCLUSION / APPLICATION

How is 'running away' a good picture of disobeying God?

Do we ever run away like this? Ever for the same reasons as Jonah?

What do we need to remember about God in those times?

How have we been rescued like Jonah and like the sailors?

Pick some verses from chapter 2 and turn them into your prayers of thanks.

Jonah 1:1-2:10



Theme of *Jonah*

Jonah is not so much about a giant fish as a giant God. The God who is revealed through *Jonah* is shown to be bigger and kinder than Jonah is comfortable with. The challenge is brought to us also about whether our attitudes and behaviour match up to the gracious Lord we say we serve.

The story revolves around a message for the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Assyria were the major superpower of the day and sworn enemies of Israel. Jonah needed to tell them that God planned on destroying their city in 40 days.

However, Jonah refused to deliver the message, knowing that God is gracious and would forgive the Ninevites if they repented of their sin – which is exactly what happens! Chapter 4 reveals Jonah's hatred of the Assyrians and his reluctance to see them saved. Just as God challenged Jonah on *his* anger, so we are challenged to show God's grace to *our* enemies by delivering His message of salvation from judgement.

Along the way we see Jonah prefiguring Christ by 'dying' in the sea and being 'resurrected' via the big fish, pointing to the ultimate example of God's grace and forgiveness being shown to unworthy sinners... *and* the self-righteous!

Theme Sentence for 1:1-2:10

God is bigger than we think and kinder than we'd like... although everyone (both the sinner and the self-righteous) relies on His grace to rescue them.

How this passage fits in

Our story begins with Jonah running from the Lord, rather than obeying His command to warn the Ninevites of judgement. We must bear in mind Jonah's explanation of why he ran in 4:2-3 – he knew God would be gracious to them and he didn't want that.

Jonah fails to get away from God, who sends a storm in judgement to find him. Knowing the storm is aimed at him, he is thrown into the waves to stop others on the boat being killed as well. Despite Jonah's hatred of Gentiles, the pagan sailors see judgement averted and turn to the Lord in faith.

Meanwhile Jonah is rescued from drowning by the Lord sending a fish to swallow him and deposit him back at the start. We see God's grace shown to Jonah, who deserved to drown, and Jonah's song of praise for God's kindness in his time of need. If only Jonah could extend the same kindness to others...

Application

- Stop running from God in disobedience
- Praise God for being gracious, to sinners and the self-righteous
- Thank God for rescuing us from death by His resurrected prophet, Jesus.

[NB]

Commentary

Ideally, one would tackle these two chapters separately, as we have done in our sermon series. For the purposes of this study, we will major on chapter one, with chapter two as something of a postscript – Jonah's personal experience of the gracious God we find in chapter one.

1:1-2 Jonah son of Amittai was a prophet who served in northern Israel during the reign of Jereboam II. He crops up in 2 Kings 14:25, where he prophesied the extending of Israel's borders despite constant attacks from foreign nations like Assyria, sent by God to bring Israel back to serving Him again. Here Jonah gets a message to send to those Assyrians in Nineveh, warning them of impending judgement (see 3:4).

3 But Jonah is unwilling to go. Other prophets speak of their role as standing before the LORD receiving instructions (1 Kings 17:1; 18:15). For Jonah to *flee* God's presence is to resign as a prophet.

With Jonah in northern Israel, Nineveh was north-east, a fairly long trek inland. Joppa was south-west, in foreign territory. Tarshish was most likely on the south coast of Spain, beyond the Gibraltar Strait. Elsewhere in the Bible, Tarshish is described as a faraway and exotic land, a long way from home. Spain was the edge of the known world, so Jonah could scarcely have run further away than God wanted!

We should beware of our natural explanations for Jonah's running, e.g. fear. Jonah tells us why he ran in 4:2-3. He knew that God would be gracious and that He would forgive the Ninevites if they repented. Because God *does* eventually forgive them, Jonah asks God to kill him. That is how opposed he is to God being gracious to his enemies.

4-5 Jonah can run but he can't hide from God. God sends a storm of judgement after him. It is a serious storm. The hardened sailors are terrified and they start throwing away their precious cargo – the whole reason for their voyage to Tarshish! Meanwhile, Jonah is oblivious, escaping reality by taking a nap down in the hold.

6 The captain is not impressed with the snoozing prophet. He demands Jonah's help, but not in the way we would expect. He commands Jonah to pray. Everyone else is praying to their gods to no avail (1:5). "Perhaps" Jonah's God will spare them a thought and save them. Not for the last time (3:9) a pagan hopes that God will be gracious. This is in stark contrast to Jonah who *knows* God is gracious and hates it.

It's also interesting to note that Jonah is the only one not praying, even though he's the only one who knows the true God. He doesn't appear to have prayed here either! The captain's command is strikingly similar to God's in 1:2 ("Arise... call out...") which Jonah also ignored.

7-10 Being superstitious, the sailors cast lots to see whose fault the storm is. These were probably two dice-like cubes with black and white sides which would be rolled to receive messages from the gods: two black sides was negative, two white sides was positive, and one of each was inconclusive. This sort of divination was against God's laws. But this time it was accurate, as the finger of blame pointed at Jonah.

Jonah replies to their barrage of questions with a rather ironic confession of faith. He claims to fear (or 'worship') the LORD despite running from Him. The LORD (Yahweh) is the name God revealed to Moses to distinguish Him from other gods. He's the creator of all.

When the sailors put two and two together that *this* is the God Jonah's running from, they are petrified! Jonah tried to get away from the creator of the land and sea by leaving the land to hide on the sea – is he crazy?! Jonah's foolishness and rebellion is catching up with him.

11-16 Not knowing the LORD like Jonah does, the sailors ask how to deal with Him in His anger. Jonah knows the storm is aimed at him and so offers to be sacrificed to the waves to save the rest of the boat. The sailors don't want to see him die, even though he is to blame – contrast this with the pagan-hating destruction-loving ways of Jonah.

Eventually they realise they have no other option and so they throw Jonah into the sea. The storm miraculously stops! The sailors have seen the LORD's power and His grace in turning away judgement from them. And so they are converted, as shown in their sacrificing and making vows (promises of future faithfulness). Despite his best efforts, Jonah is having a very successful mission trip!

Here in Jonah's 'death' we see an imperfect picture of Jesus. Mark 4 tells us of a similar storm which *Jesus* slept through but eventually calmed miraculously. The storm of God's judgement heads for sinners, but Jesus volunteers to be thrown to His death in those waves to save the rest of us. Conversion comes by seeing God's judgement averted.

17 By rights, Jonah should drown. But God continues to display outrageous kindness. He deploys a big fish (not necessarily a whale) to swallow Jonah. This isn't part of Jonah's punishment but of his rescue, as later God will command to the fish to puke him out to safety (2:10).

In Matthew 12:38-41, Jesus compares Jonah's three days and nights in the fish to His own three days and nights in the tomb. Drowning in the sea, being swallowed by a fish, then being vomited out again is a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection.

2:1-2 Once inside the fish, Jonah gives his testimony. While drowning he prayed and God answered by sending the fish. He went from the belly of Sheol (the place of the dead) to a different kind of belly! Jonah's 'psalm' is a collection of quotes from other psalms, showing how Jonah's rescue is a prime example of the way God always saves.

3-7 Jonah was practically dead but God resurrected/raised him (6b). Though still inside the fish, he's convinced that he is halfway through a rescue and that he will get home to the temple one day (4b).

8-9 Jonah makes a sacrifice and vows, a chapter behind the sailors (1:16). He knows the LORD is the only God who saves. This is great mission theology! But we see from chapter 4 that Jonah still isn't fully persuaded that idol-worshippers should be forgiven. Jonah loves God's grace when it saves *him* even if not when God shows grace to others.

10 Jonah is spat up on the shore. Will he be obedient this time? (3:1-2)