

Group Study Outline

LAUNCHING

What would it take for the *whole* of our city to be converted?
How likely do we think this is and why?

Go round the room, retelling the story so far in Jonah. (Maybe 5 words each!)
If we'd only ever read Jonah 1-2, what are we expecting to happen in Nineveh?

QUESTIONS

Read Jonah 3:1-10

What does God tell Jonah to do? Does this sound familiar? (1:1-2)
What is the message Jonah delivers? Put it in your own words. (4)
Why is God planning to destroy Nineveh? Is it fair for God to do it?
If you stood up in the town centre and said God was going to destroy everything next month, how do you imagine people would react?
How would you feel about doing it? Why?
How *do* the people react to Jonah's preaching? (5)
Is this surprising? Why or why not?
How does the message get out to everyone? (6-7)
What is the significance of wearing sackcloth, sitting in ashes, and fasting?
What do these outward actions show about their hearts?
How does the king tell them to interact with God? (8)
What do you think they were praying as they called out mightily to God?
What do they need to do about their sinful lives?
Describe how you imagine the atmosphere in Nineveh.

Read Matthew 12:38-41

What is "the sign of Jonah"?
What are the people of Nineveh commended by Jesus for?
From what we read of them in Jonah 3, how could we emulate their response?
How certain was the king that their repentance would lead to forgiveness? (9)
In what way is he like the sea captain in 1:6?
Why does the king repent and encourage others to do the same if he isn't sure it will 'work'?
How *does* God react to their repentance? (10)
Is this surprising? Why or why not?

CONCLUSION / APPLICATION

In what way is our gospel the same as Jonah's message?
In what way are we like the Ninevites? In what way *should* we be like them?
How does God respond to us?
Do we really believe that evil people like the Ninevites can respond like this?
And that God forgives people like this so readily?
What difference would it make if we *really* believed this? To how we relate to God, and how we relate to non-Christians?

Praise God for warning us of judgement... and for forgiving us when we repent!

Jonah 3:1-10



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 the reader is 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 3:1-10

God warns sinners of judgement and shows mercy to the repentant.

How this passage fits in

After a failed attempt to run from the LORD, Jonah is back on dry land, thanks to God's grace and a fish's upset tummy. Far from seeking to destroy him in the sea, God still wants to use Jonah as a prophet, reissuing him the same assignment he had rejected: go to Nineveh and preach the bad news to them.

The people of Nineveh instantly believe Jonah's message. With the encouragement of their leaders, everybody shows sorrow for their sin by grieving over it as well as stopping doing it. Perhaps unexpectedly, despite having sent Jonah all that way with the warning, the judgement never comes. God treats them with mercy, due to their repentance.

Jonah saw this mercy coming a mile off, however. That's why he ran away in the first place (4:2), because he didn't want God to be gracious to his enemies. Thankfully for us, God always shows mercy when we repent.

Application

- Believe the warning of coming judgement
- Respond to that warning by turning back to God away from sin.
- Praise God for His undeserved mercy to sinners

Commentary

- 1-2 Jonah has just been puked up onto the beach (2:10). Despite his initial disobedience and God's anger directed towards him through the storm, God rescued him in the big fish and now has plans to keep working through Jonah. God is being very patient with Jonah!

These verses are strikingly similar to the original command to Jonah in 1:1-2. We know from the earlier instruction that the reason for this visit to Nineveh is God's awareness of their evil ways. We are yet to learn the exact content of the message but Jonah's job will be to "call out against" the city, so some measure of condemnation is in view. The fact that God will reveal the message to Jonah later is heightening the drama in the build-up to the big Nineveh showdown!

- 3 Nineveh was a major city in Assyria, the superpower at the time. They were proven enemies of Israel, having attacked and taken their territory in the past. Prophets like Nahum talk about how evil they were in Nineveh especially. Politically and morally, they were baddies.

The city was "great" in the same way the fish was great (1:17) in that it was big. Size-wise, this verse could be saying that it would take three days to walk from the east to the west of the city, which is pretty large! Or it could be saying that it took three days to really see and experience the city with all his sights. Again this would be impressive in its day. (I wonder how many days it would take to 'do' Nottingham?)

- 4 We should notice the speed of this interaction. Jonah had only begun to enter the city; one day out of the expected three. His message is only 8 words long. And the people's response in the next verse is immediate. This is supposed to surprise us after the lengthy build up; with the boat and the fish, this trip has been a long time coming!

This is the first time we hear what Jonah's message from God is. It is a warning that in just over a month, the city will be "overthrown". This could mean that an army would come in to capture the city, raiders would come in and burn it down, or that God would simply destroy it from the heavens, as He did with Sodom and Gomorrah. The exact threat is left vague but the feeling is dreadfully ominous.

- 5 Amazingly, the people believed it! It's interesting to note that when the people believe the message from God's messenger, we're told that they believed *God*, not simply Jonah or the warning. Here we see the power of God's word to turn sinners around. As with the Thessalonians when they heard Paul's preaching, true conversion hears a message from a preacher and "accept[s] it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess 2:13). Jesus holds up the Ninevites as the model response to Himself (Matt 12:38-42). Just as Jonah drowned and then walked out of the fish alive to preach another day, so Jesus actually died then rose again as the dead-and-resurrected preacher who's greater than Jonah. We should repent like Nineveh did.

Their 'belief' isn't simply an acknowledgement of the truth, but a shift in attitude and behaviour in light of that truth. There are public displays of repentance and grief, which are carried out by everybody in the city, from the beggar on the street to the rulers in the palace.

- 6 It's to the palace that our attention now shifts. Much in the same way that 1:17 gives us the headline of Jonah's rescue (the LORD sent a fish to swallow him) and then 2:1-9 fill in the gaps of how that happened in Jonah's experience (drowning, praying, being answered and rescued), so 3:5 gives the headline of the people's response (belief) and now 6-9 explain how that came about (the king's broadcast).

Nineveh wasn't the capital of Assyria but it did have royal palaces. 2 Kings 19:36 talks about Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, going to live in Nineveh after the LORD defeated his army at Jerusalem. So the king of Nineveh could be a regional ruler, but also might be the king of the whole Assyrian empire who lived in Nineveh! Either way, this is an important man. (The fact he's on a throne is a hint!)

News of this strange prophet with a message of judgement made its way to the top. And the king takes the threat very seriously. We see him humbling himself. He steps off his throne and takes off his royal clothes, stripping himself of his status symbols. He then goes further by wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes. This was a very common sign of grief in the ancient world (Gen 37:34; Job 16:15). Wearing basic, itchy clothes and sitting in the dust was an outward sign of inner turmoil and dejection. It's rather like dressing for a funeral; how can we act normally and comfortably on such a terrible day as this?

- 7-8 The king doesn't just take the warning personally but sees it as a matter of urgency for everyone. He treats it with the same diligence as he might if he saw a fire sweeping through the city or had seen an army approaching – people need to be warned to take evasive action.

The action he has in mind is repentance. He extends the sackcloth and ashes to everybody and calls for a fast. There's also a command to pray urgently ("call out mightily to God"), presumably asking God not to do it. And also to say, 'sorry', as evidenced by his final command to turn from their evil ways, especially violence. This disaster is coming because of their wickedness and so the wickedness has to stop.

- 9 The king has no guarantee that their repentance will stop the coming judgement. Jonah's message contained no such reassurance or get-out clause. It's all done in wishful thinking! And a genuine sorrow for sin, not just a means to an end. "Who knows? God *may* turn and relent... that we may not perish." This is similar to the uncertain hope of the sea captain in 1:6 – "*Perhaps* the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish." Contrast this with Jonah in 4:1-3 who did know God would be gracious, but would rather they had suffered for their sins.

- 10 As with the captain, the king's hope was well placed. God *was* gracious and forgave them in response to their genuine repentance. We should be amazed by God's mercy. But not surprised. Jeremiah 18:7-10 says that when God declares judgement on a city, it is conditional on their repentance; if they turn from sin, He'll relent. God uses the very real threat of judgement as the means of calling people back to Him so that they *don't* experience that judgement.

It's the same today. Judgement is coming – but if we repent at the news from the dead-and-resurrected messenger, Jesus, we'll be spared.