

Group Study Outline

LAUNCHING

How do you feel when you hear of really bad people becoming Christians?
Is there anyone who you would have a hard time accepting had been forgiven?

This passage shows just how much more gracious God is than us...

QUESTIONS

After a really successful mission trip, how would we expect someone to feel?
How *does* Jonah feel?
What has just happened to make Jonah so furious? (3:10)
Why did Jonah run away to Tarshish in the first place?

How is God described in 2?
Aren't these good things? Why would they make Jonah angry?
What must Jonah feel about the Ninevites?
How did Jonah feel about God being gracious back in chapter 2?
What's the difference between then and now?
What's at the heart of Jonah's problem?

What is God's response to Jonah's anger in 4?
How is more of God's character from 2 being shown to Jonah?

Why do you think Jonah went to sit watching Nineveh? (5)

Retell the incident with the plant in 6-8.
Track how Jonah was feeling through all this.
Can you associate with how Jonah felt? Do you ever feel like that?

How does God say Jonah felt about the plant? (10)
Why is the strength of his reaction to the plant extreme according to 10?
How does God feel about Nineveh? Why? (11)

How would you summarise what God wants to teach Jonah in 10-11?
Why do you think the story ends so suddenly?

CONCLUSION / APPLICATION

How do you feel about God being merciful to the Ninevites? Is it fair?
Who are the people our society would write off as unforgiveable?
Who do you find it difficult to love?
How do we talk and think about non-Christians? Or people we don't get on with, who have perhaps wronged us in the past?
How does God feel about those people?

Jonah's lack of love led to not wanting to warn the Ninevites of judgement.
Are there people *we're* not telling? Could a lack of love be a reason why?

Thank God that He loves lost people like us!
Pray that God would give us His love for lost people... so we'd tell them!

Jonah 4:1-11



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 4:1-11

God is more gracious than we're comfortable with, caring deeply for really sinful people, and we should be more like Him.

How this passage fits in

The runaway prophet finally got to Nineveh and everybody believed his message. They repented and so God relented, deciding not to overthrow them after all. You might expect Jonah to be pleased, but he is furious. He explains that this is why he had run away in the first place. He knew God's propensity to forgive people and so didn't want to warn them in case they had turned back and were saved. This is Jonah's worst nightmare.

God has been enormously gracious to Jonah throughout the book. Not destroying him straight away. Sending the fish to swallow him. Getting the fish to vomit him out. Giving him another chance to preach. Chapter 2 is Jonah's song of praise to a gracious saviour God. Jonah's issue is *who* gets saved.

Assyria did many evil things, including to Israel. God agrees (1:2). But He also loves them. Will we extend the same grace to our enemies as God does?

Application

- Appreciate how much God loves even the worst sinners
- Love our enemies like God does, seeking the salvation of everyone

[NB]

Commentary

- 1 This verse is an understatement. Jonah is fuming. To understand what triggered it, we need to look back to what has just happened in chapter 3, especially verse 10. Jonah went to Nineveh, told them God's message (they'd be dead in 40 days), the people turned away from their sin, and so God turned away from His anger. *That's* what infuriates Jonah.
- In 3:10 the words for "evil way" and "disaster" are the same, meaning "bad thing". And here in 4:1 "displeased... exceedingly" is a strong version of that same word. 3:10-4:1 could read, "The Ninevites turned from their bad things, so God turned from doing the bad thing He said He'd do to them. But Jonah thought this was a REALLY bad thing!"
- 2-3 Here we find Jonah's reason for running away back in chapter 1. He knew that this message of judgement was a warning and that if the people repented then God would forgive them. Jonah really hated the Ninevites. This is most likely because Nineveh was a major city in Assyria, who were Israel's enemies and who had been attacking them for many years. However, Jonah's main gripe here isn't with the Assyrians so much as with God! He doesn't like how gracious God is.
- 3:10 sounds like Exodus 32:14, where God was angry with the Israelites for making the golden calf, but because of Moses' intercession, "the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." Jonah obviously makes this connection because in his complaint he quotes from Exodus 34:6-7. This is when, after forgiving the people for the golden calf incident, the LORD tells Moses how gracious and compassionate He is before renewing the covenant with Israel by giving them the Ten Commandments again.
- Deep down, Jonah doesn't like this kind of steadfast love being shown to anyone other than Israel. He has forgotten that Israel were once just a bunch of pagans and idol worshippers before God was gracious to them and made them into His people. Jonah hates the idea of his enemies being shown the same grace he enjoys. He is so furious that it makes him want to die.
- 4 God begins His cross-examination. Is Jonah's reaction reasonable?
- 5 Jonah left the city in a huff and sat on a hill overlooking Nineveh to see what would happen to it. Perhaps he was waiting for them to revert to their old sinful ways (fingers crossed!) or else hoping that God would overthrow them despite their repentance. If the sailors and the king can hope in "perhaps" (1:6) and "who knows" (3:9), so can Jonah. He built himself a little booth, like the ones the Israelites lived in during the Feast of Tabernacles – a very basic and uncomfortable structure.
- 6 The LORD God begins to teach Jonah an important lesson here. Firstly, he makes a plant grow up overnight. It's lovely and shady so Jonah is really comfortable and very pleased. The plant is sent to save Jonah from his discomfort ("bad thing" again!). It's another reminder that Jonah loves the LORD being a saving God when it's *him* He's saving!

There are a couple of other small things to notice here. One is God's name. When dealing with Jonah so far, and also the sailors once they know more (1:14, 16), He has been referred to as "the LORD", His covenant name. With pagans like the sailors early on (1:6) and the Ninevites (3:5, 8, 9, 10), He is called simply "God". But now in chapter 4, He is "the LORD God". Jonah is in limbo with God – how will he act towards Him? Like a true Israelite or like a clueless Gentile?

Also we see God's power over creation. He "appointed" the plant, just as He appointed the big fish (1:17) and he would appoint the worm (7) and the wind (8). The LORD is utterly sovereign throughout.

- 7-8 Jonah's paradise doesn't last long. God sends a pest to eat the plant so it dies, leaving Jonah exposed to the heat. What's worse is the scorching wind giving him sunstroke. These 'sirocco' winds, bringing sand and baking hot air, are terribly dangerous and uncomfortable even today. But before we feel too sorry for Jonah, we should remember that this is only a problem because he insists on camping out in the hope that Nineveh will be destroyed! He could always go home! However, again, he would rather die, he's that hot and fed up with God.
- 9 God repeats His question from 4. Is Jonah right to be angry, this time about the plant? Jonah replies petulantly that, yes, he is justified in being furious enough to die. Jonah really is childish! He pouts, answers back, and even tries to act 'holier than thou'... with God!
- 10-11 This is the moral of the story, both of the whole book and of the incident with the plant and the worm. We should be careful about making too many direct explanations of each element of the story (i.e. the plant is like the fish, the worm is like the king, etc.) but rather take the story as making one big point.

Jonah pitied the plant. He was very sorry to see it go despite having had no part in cultivating it and only having it for one day. How much more should God pity Nineveh? There are lots of people there, clueless people who need compassion. The reference to the cattle is probably commenting on the size of the city; that it's a flourishing place not a tiny village with no livestock. But it also shows God's care for *all* of His creation, including the animals.

It's silly how het up Jonah gets over something so small as a plant, but we've all been similarly angry about circumstances not going our way. This gives us a tiny insight into God's compassion for people. It would be no small thing for Him to just wipe out a city full of people, no matter how evil they are. We may see Jonah's attitude as extreme (and it is, to make a point), but the book is more focused on God's attitude than Jonah's, which is something we don't match up to.

It's strange how abruptly the book ends. We don't know how Jonah reacted to God's challenge. He probably did see the error of his ways and go on to teach others the lessons he learnt, hence us having this story in our Bibles! But the story deliberately leaves us unsure, so as to give space for our own answer to God's question. Our gracious LORD God pities evil people and seeks their salvation. Do we?