

Pre-Exilic Prophet: Jonah

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Jonah is an amazing and powerful story of God's omnipresence, omnipotence, and mercy. This story explores God's heart and will for both Jonah, his rebellious prophet, and the Nineveh, a city of wicked people. The book of Jonah dives deeply into understanding God's heart toward his people and his enemies, revealing how he is full of mercy, grace, and compassion toward both. It also reveals God's response to sinners and his supremacy over everything, while encouraging us to consider whether our own desires align with God's desires.

In this book, God uses the story of a reluctant and disobedient prophet to reveal God's character. God calls Jonah to preach a message of judgment to the people of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. Instead of obeying God's will, however, Jonah attempts to run away from God. No matter where Jonah flees, though, God is present and uses his power to stop Jonah's plans. The book of Jonah shows us that ultimately God is the one in control of our lives as Proverbs 16:9 reveals, "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps." This story is a reminder that all of us are characters in God's story, and our purpose as his creation is to follow his will for our lives, no matter how we personally feel about it.

The book of Jonah also reveals the height and depth of God's mercy and how we should respond to his infinite goodness and grace. God shows mercy to all who repent and turn from their wicked ways. As we shall soon see, Jonah is perfectly fine when God extends mercy towards him, but he is exceedingly displeased (Jonah 4:1) when God extends that same mercy toward Jonah's enemies. God uses the book of Jonah to expose the self-centeredness in our own hearts by encouraging us to consider whether we are pursuing our own desires over God's desires.

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

As a child or even as an adult, have you ever received mercy instead of a punishment and were extremely grateful? It is easy to be grateful when mercy is extended to us, but how would you feel if mercy were extended to someone who did not deserve it?

Jonah receives immense grace after he tries to run away from, ignore, and reject God's plan nearly every step of the way. But Jonah is infuriated when God extends that same grace to a people whom he considers evil and wicked. Unfortunately, we tend to be just like Jonah. The purpose of this story is to make us more aware of where our thinking does not align with God's will and allow him to transform our minds and hearts so that we become more like him. This book calls us to ask for his will to be done, not our own.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

Chapter 1: Jonah Runs FROM God

Chapter 2: Jonah Runs TO God

Chapter 3: Jonah Runs WITH God

Chapter 4: Jonah Runs AGAINST God

JESUS IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

In the Book of Jonah, God sends the prophet Jonah to call the Ninevites to repent from their sin. However, Jonah's heart is not aligned with God's heart, and Jonah initially refuses to go to Nineveh since he believes it is unfair for the Ninevites, a wicked people, to receive God's mercy and forgiveness for their sin. Eventually, Jonah reluctantly preaches to Nineveh, the people repent in response, and God relents from bringing disaster upon them. Similarly, Jesus is sent by the Father to preach a message of repentance to all people, no matter how evil. We all stand before a holy, perfect God covered in evil and sin (Romans 3:23). The divine punishment of sin is death (Romans 6:23), but Jesus provides a way for our sins to be covered. The price of our salvation was bought through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ for our sake (1 Peter 2:24). Throughout all of this, Jesus perfectly sought his Father's will over his own (Matthew 26:39).

Unlike Jonah, Jesus willingly followed God's plan. Jesus is the perfect Jonah and the perfect messenger of repentance, because he not only calls all people to repent, but he also purchased forgiveness through his own blood and sinlessness. Jonah points forward to Jesus by foreshadowing him. After Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish (Jonah 1:17), he was spewed out onto the dry land and proceeded to offer a message of repentance to Nineveh. Similarly, Jesus spent three days in the grave and was resurrected to offer mercy, forgiveness, and eternal life to everyone who believes in him. Jonah is a foreshadowing of God's perfect messenger and way to salvation (John 14:6) for all people, in all times, and in all places.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW WE SHOULD READ THE BOOK OF JONAH

OBSERVATION

- What is God teaching us in the book of Jonah?
 - Location: Where are we?
 - Events: What is happening?
 - People: What people are described and what are they doing/saying?
 - Time: When is this story happening?
 - Purpose: Why is it happening? Or do we know?

What literary devices are being used? How are the characters interacting with one another? What is the author emphasizing, repeating, contrasting, or bringing attention to?

INTERPRETATION

- What does the author want the reader to notice? What are some common themes/words/phrases?
 - Example: Use of word “appointed” – shows God’s sovereignty and rule over his creation (Jonah 1:17, 4:6)
 - Example: Use of word “exceedingly” – shows where Jonah’s priorities lie (Jonah 4:1, 4:6)
- What is happening at this point in history? How do the Ninevites relate to the Israelites? Why might Jonah hate them?
- Explore God’s power and sovereignty over his creation (how does the text demonstrate God’s control over his creation?) Read Colossians 1:16-17 and Mark 4:39-41, which underscore that God created the world and has complete control over it.
- How does the book of Jonah challenge our comfort zone and priorities? How and where is Jonah choosing his own desires over God’s?
- Highlight whom God is showing mercy to. How do they respond to God’s grace being shown to them? How does Jonah respond when grace is extended to the pagan sailors and Ninevites?
- Trace the theme of prayer in this book. Who does Jonah pray for? When does he pray to God?
- Who is caring for lives of others? Examine the dialogue between Jonah and God and between Jonah and the pagan sailors. What are each of the characters concerned about?
- Where does Jonah fail? How is Christ the perfect Jonah? What does Jesus mean when he talks about Jonah and repentance? Read Matthew 12:39-41.

APPLICATION

- What does God want us to pray for, and how does God want us to pray?
- How do we seek God’s will and desires over our own?
- What does God want us to prioritize?
- How should we respond when we see our enemies experience God’s mercy?
- How can we respond when God calls us to do hard things?
- How can we be better characters in God’s story?
- How can we reconsider our desires to look more like God’s desires?

PRAYER

- Jonah only prayed when he was experiencing discomfort or took offense at God’s mercy (Jonah 2, 4:2-4, 4:8-11). How can Jonah’s poor example warn us from viewing God as either a vending machine for blessings or a scapegoat for our problems?
- How should we approach God through prayer? What should we address/prioritize while praying?

- Jonah is constantly fighting against God's will. Pray that God will transform your desires to be more in line with his. What would that look like?
- At the end of the book, God questions Jonah by asking how Jonah could be more concerned about a plant than hundreds of thousands of people who were ignorant of moral or spiritual issues. How might God be calling us out on our priorities in our own lives? Do we care more about our own comfort or God's plan and goals? Do we neglect other people's needs in focusing on our own well-being? Pray that God would search you and know your heart on this matter (Psalm 139:23-24) and realign your desires with his priorities.

CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF JONAH

"We think that we do well to be angry with the rebellious, and so we prove ourselves to be more like Jonah than Jesus." – Charles Spurgeon

"The farther we get from God, the more the world spirals out of control. The wonderful news is that our Lord is a God of mercy, and He responds to repentance. In Jonah's day, Nineveh was the lone world superpower—wealthy, unconcerned, and self-centered. When the Prophet Jonah finally traveled to Nineveh and proclaimed God's warning, people heard and repented. I believe the same thing can happen once again, this time in our nation. It's something I long for." – Billy Graham

"And when we examine the story of Jonah, great is the force of the resemblance. Jesus was sent to preach repentance; Jonah also was sent: but whereas the one fled, not knowing what should come to pass; the other came willingly, to give repentance unto salvation. Jonah was asleep in the ship, and snoring amidst the stormy sea; while Jesus also slept, the sea, according to God's providence, began to rise, to show in the sequel the might of Him who slept. To the one they said, 'Why are you sleeping? Arise, call your God, that God may save us;' but in the other case they say unto the Master, 'Lord, save us.' Then they said, Call upon thy God; here they say, save Thou. But the one says, Take me, and cast me into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you; the other, Himself rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. The one was cast into a whale's belly: but the other of His own accord went down, where the invisible whale of death is. And He went down of His own accord, that death might cast up those whom he had devoured, according to that which is written, I will ransom them from the power of the grave; and from the hand of death I will redeem them." - Cyril of Jerusalem (4th Century Bishop)

