

Small Group Guide

A Rebellious Missionary and a Relentless God

The Church at Brook Hills

June 28, 2010

Jonah

This guide is to help you facilitate discussion with your Small Group. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering and owning the truths of God's Word. There may be questions you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on their relationship with God. Your role is to facilitate this experience not to complete the discussion guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid teaching task list.

Jonah

The book of Jonah broadcasts the relationship between a rebellious missionary and a relentless God. It is one of the most famous stories in the Old Testament due to the miraculous moment when a man is swallowed by a whale. The message of Jonah, however, moves beyond the miraculous and magnifies human sin in the ruthless forms of racism and hatred. In contrast, the message of Jonah highlights God's sovereign grace in the remarkable forms of persistence and compassion.

Study the Text . . .

In vv. 1-2, God calls Jonah to do something he does not want to do. The LORD wants him to go to the great and wicked city of Nineveh (v.2). The term translated "great" means not only large in size but wide in influence. What happened in Nineveh affected many other areas of the ancient world, much like modern day New York City. The term translated "wicked" means that the city was marked by much evil behavior, but it also carries a meaning that suggests the city may have experienced some type of calamity. One might think of Nineveh like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans was notorious for its hedonistic habits before being devastated by a hurricane. Likewise, Nineveh was a great city with people that were far from God but that may have had great physical needs. In His compassion, the LORD wanted to meet the city's needs, primarily spiritual and possibly physical, so He calls forth His prophet, Jonah.

In vv. 3-17, Jonah rebels against God's call. He does not want to go to Nineveh so he rises, boards a boat, and sails in the opposite direction. He is described as trying to flee "from the presence of the LORD" (v. 3). He consciously rebels against the LORD and all that the LORD desires him to do. Yet, the LORD is relentless in His purposes, so He "follows" Jonah by hurling a great wind upon the sea to disrupt the voyage. The storm frightened all on board. They began crying out to their gods to discover who was at fault. Before the boat and all on board were destroyed, Jonah was identified as the one who had brought trouble to the ship. Jonah volunteered to be thrown overboard in an attempt to appease God and stop the storm (1:12, 15). To our surprise, the other sailors at first refused to throw him overboard. Thus, the pagan sailors demonstrate more compassion for Jonah than Jonah did for them or the people of Nineveh. Jonah's actions show that he would rather die than obey God by going to Nineveh. Yet, God did not let that happen. He appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah (1:17). Once the storm ceased, all on board worshiped the LORD (v. 16).

- Why do you think Jonah refused to go to Nineveh? (see 4:1-2)
- Compare Jonah's attempt to "flee from the presence of the LORD" with Psalm 139:7-12.
- Why did God relentlessly pursue Jonah in his rebellion?

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- Why do you think the sailors continued rowing and fighting the storm even after they found out the cause of the storm was Jonah?
- What other examples exist in Scripture of God relentlessly pursuing people in the midst of their rebellion? (i.e. 1 Kings 19:1-18; Luke 5:27-32)

Group Discussion . . .

- Why do you think Jonah refused to go to Nineveh?
- Is it possible to flee from the presence of the LORD?
- Have you ever consciously rebelled against God's will for your life? Ask if someone would mind sharing their story.
- Have you ever been angry or rebellious because of God's forgiveness / grace / compassion towards someone else (maybe an enemy)? If so, why?
- How did you discover the LORD's relentless pursuit of you?
- How does knowing that the LORD relentlessly pursues those who rebel against Him affect how you relate to Him and to others?

Jonah's Rescue (Ch. 2)

Study the Text...

In Jonah 2, we find the prophet in the belly of a great fish—where he spent three days and three nights. Often, we read Jonah's story and consider the fish to be an instrument of judgment. We think, "If Jonah had not disobeyed, then he would not have wound up in such a precarious position." However, had God not provided the fish, Jonah would certainly have died (v. 5). Just before drowning, Jonah cried out to God in repentance (v. 7). In verse 7, Jonah "remembered" the LORD. This term is used frequently throughout Scripture. To remember does not simply mean to call to mind something that was forgotten. It is a call to action. A call to remember is a call to act on that which is remembered (See also 1 Corinthians 7:23-32 noting the role of remembering in the LORD's Supper). Jonah remembered what the LORD was like and *acted on that knowledge* by crying out to Him!

Even while Jonah was in the belly of a great fish, God heard and responded to his prayer. No one's rebellion renders them beyond God's redemptive reach. In response, God provided the fish to rescue Jonah from the consequences of his disobedience. The fish, then, is a surprising instrument of salvation! Jonah realizes this and prays the prayer contained in this chapter. Its theme is captured in the last phrase: "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" In Matthew 12:40-41, Jesus associates his death, burial, and resurrection with Jonah's time spent in the belly of the great fish. People, like the Pharisees, viewed the cross as an instrument of divine judgment. Anyone who died on a cross was considered cursed by God (See, Galatians 3:13). However, God sent Jesus to die on the cross in order to save people from their rebellion. As God brought Jonah's life from the pit (v.6), God would vindicate His Son, securing salvation for all who believe. He would raise Jesus from the grave after three days and nights in the tomb. The message of the Gospel shows the world that "Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

All nations need to know that "salvation belongs to the LORD." Christians are

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commissioned to carry the message of the cross to all nations so that a remnant from all nations can be rescued from divine judgment.

- How does Jonah's prayer resemble many of the Psalms? (i.e. Psalm 3; 139; 118)
- What do you think Jonah "remembered" about the LORD (v. 7)?
- How does Jonah respond to the LORD's salvation?

Group Discussion...

- What does it mean to remember the LORD?
- Where in the New Testament are we told to "remember"? (answer—the LORD's supper)
- Why is it important to act on that which is remembered rather than to just think about it?
- In what ways is the Gospel a surprising instrument of salvation?
- What is the appropriate response to the LORD's salvation?
- How does knowing that no one is beyond God's redemptive reach shape your confidence in approaching and executing the Great Commission?

Nineveh's Repentance

Study the Text (Ch. 3)

The LORD granted Jonah a second chance and commanded him to go to Nineveh. Jonah obeyed. Upon arriving in the city, Jonah spent several days preaching a message of judgment (v. 4). God gave Nineveh forty days and in so doing He showed merciful restraint. He restrained judgment so that the people might repent and find rescue. The people believe his message and repent (v. 5). People all throughout the city of Nineveh repented (vv. 6-9). Just as God responded to Jonah's repentance by coming to his rescue, God "relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (v. 10). God spared the people of Nineveh because they believed His word and repented of their sin. God relentlessly pursued Jonah in the midst of his rebellion so that he might relent from destroying Nineveh upon their repentance. In other words, God showed Jonah grace and mercy so that He might show Nineveh grace and mercy.

- What was Jonah's message?
- Why was God gracious towards Jonah?
- What does the people's repentance look like?
- Examine what repentance looks like or would look like in other people's lives in Scripture (i.e. Luke 5:27-32; Mark 10:17-22)

Group Discussion...

- What is the relationship between God's relentless pursuit of Jonah and His decision to relent from destroying Nineveh?
- Why did God give Jonah forty days? (merciful restraint)
- In light of what happens in Nineveh, why did God relentlessly pursue Jonah?

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- Why does God show us grace and mercy?
- What does it mean to repent?
- What does repentance look like in our lives?

Study the Text (ch. 4)...

The entire narrative comes to a climax in chapter four. In vv. 1-3, the reason why Jonah initially refused to go to Nineveh is revealed. He knew God would be gracious and merciful to the people of Nineveh if they repented. Jonah did not want that to happen because he was a racist rebel whose heart was filled with hatred toward the Ninevites. Fear did not prompt his disobedience, a lack of compassion and hatred did. Just as God treated the people of Nineveh better than they deserved, He treated Jonah better than he deserved. God appointed a plant “to save him from his discomfort” (v. 6). The word “appoint” is the same word used to describe the fish in 1:17. This made Jonah happy, but God also “appointed” a worm to eat the plant, which then made Jonah angry. Bitter Jonah became angry enough to die. Jonah revealed that he was more concerned about his comfort than the salvation of the Ninevites. But, God revealed that He was more concerned about the salvation of the 120,000 persons than he was with Jonah’s comfort.

- Why was Jonah exceedingly displeased and angry?
- Why was he so filled with hatred toward the Ninevites?
- What does it mean for God to be gracious and merciful?
- How is God’s sovereignty portrayed throughout the Jonah narrative?
- Compare Jonah’s reaction to God’s mercy and grace for Nineveh with the sailors’ reaction to discovering that Jonah was the cause of the storm. Why would the story of Jonah be offensive to someone that had made Israeli patriotism an idol?
- Compare Jonah’s reaction to God’s mercy and grace for Nineveh with the older brother’s reaction to the father’s love for the younger brother in Jesus’ parable of the two lost sons in Luke 15:25-32. What sin does Jonah and the older brother share?

Group Discussion...

- How might racism and hatred prevent us from being obedient to the Great Commission?
- Is there a particular kind of person that we have trouble loving? Why?
- How might we cultivate hearts of compassion like God’s rather than copying the heartlessness of Jonah?
- Are we more concerned with our comforts (i.e. plants) than we are with God’s compassion for the nations?
- What are our “plants?” What blessings from God have we turned into idols such that if they were taken from us we would be “angry enough to die?”
- How do we respond when the LORD removes our comforts?
- What is keeping us from being obedient to God’s command to all believers to make disciples of all nations?