

GOD'S HEART FOR THE NATIONS

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God loves all peoples and sends out His Word so that they might repent of their sin.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Jonah

+ **SETTING:**

Many use the story of Jonah, a picture book favorite, as a cautionary tale of the consequences of disobedience. Yet the book of Jonah is more than a tale of a man on the run who ends up in the belly of a fish. God gave Jonah, a prophet during the rule of Jeroboam II (793-753 BC), the great honor and responsibility of declaring His words to His people. He enjoyed the role of prophet during a time of relative ease and safety. But when God called him to go and speak out against his evil enemies, Jonah bolted in an attempt to shirk the responsibility he had previously embraced.

DAY 1

READ:

Jonah 1:1-10

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Jonah 1:7-10

NOTES

Trouble. We try to avoid it as much as possible. No one wants trouble. Yet the Bible gives many examples of the woes of humankind and how God works in the midst of our messes.

When trouble comes, it's easy to start thinking, "Why? Why do I have to deal with this difficulty? Why did this struggle come? Why can't my life be easy?"

Instead, perhaps the question, "How?" is more helpful. "How is God using this for my formation? How is God using this to draw others to Himself? How can I see God in a bigger way, not despite of, but in light of my circumstances?"

While there certainly is a place for learning from our mistakes, not all trouble we encounter is a direct result of something we've done wrong. Here in the book of Jonah, we see that Jonah's rebellion brought correction, and the stress that correction caused extended beyond Jonah. The mariners found themselves in the eye of Jonah's storm. Similarly, the suffering in our lives can be due to someone else's sin, if not our own. Other times, problems come our way as a result of the limitedness and brokenness of this world. A leaky roof. A worn-out immune system. The devastation of a hurricane, earthquake, or fire.

The sailors here experienced great distress due to Jonah's disobedience. Yet God used the dilemma they found themselves in to point them to His character. They emerged from this episode of trouble with greater knowledge of who God is. Hopefully they continued their search for truth upon their return to dry land and found eternal salvation from the One who spared them from the raging sea.

What troubles are you facing today? Instead of only asking God, "Why?" take some time today to ask Him to show you "how" He is using this problem in your life for your good and the good of those around you.

DAY 2

READ:

Jonah 1:11-17

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Jonah 1:17

NOTES

Don't run from God or else He'll send a whale to swallow you up in punishment. This is the application point many have errantly taken from the book of Jonah. On the surface, this seems to some to be the main point of the passage. But taken in context of the big picture of the rest of the book of Jonah (as well as the main message of Scripture), a contrasting teaching emerges: The big fish was a means of deliverance sent from God. Those three nasty days and nights in the fish were a gift of grace.

God used the fish to rescue Jonah from death. God used the storm to stop Jonah in his disobedient tracks. Later in the book of Jonah, we see how God used the good (the vine) and the bad (the worm) to uncover Jonah's entrenched entitlement and lack of compassion. Definitely, there is an element of disciplinary action involved here. But correction from our good, loving Father is a means of grace, not judgment, for we know that the Lord disciplines those He loves just like a father would (Prov. 3:11-12).

Jonah is not a book about divine punishment and weird object lessons. It is a book about God and His gracious pursuit of sinners—a Father who disciplines those in whom He delights. It is a story of God and His relentless compassion for all people. It is a living illustration of the gospel at work in both the lives of Jonah, the mariners, and the Ninevites.

God is pursuing us, and He gives us every opportunity to come back to Him when we stray, rebel, and disobey. Whether we choose to or not is up to us. But in His persistent pursuit, we see a God who loves us even as He disciplines us.

How do you primarily view the discipline of the Lord: as a despicable act of an angry, distant deity or a gracious act of an affectionate, loving Father? Why?

DAY 3

READ:

Jonah 2:1–3:5

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Jonah 3:1

NOTES



ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #47: THE GOSPEL

The Bible teaches that the gospel is both an event and a story. First, it is an event that took place at a specific point in history, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the redemption of sinners (1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 5:21). Second, the gospel is also the story of redemption that God has planned since before the foundations of the earth (Eph. 1:4), which runs through Scripture, and which culminates in a restored and redeemed creation—a new heaven and new earth where sin, death, and suffering will never again plague humanity, and God’s people will live with Him forever (Isa. 25:8; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21). The event and story do not exist apart from or in conflict with one another, but together inspire us to a life of devotion and mission.

Our God is a God of second chances. Here we clearly see God recommissioning Jonah to carry God’s message to the Ninevites. It seems as if Jonah has had a change of heart, and instead of running, he goes willingly to Nineveh, and the Ninevites respond in faith and repentance.

This is good news! Yet we later see that Jonah’s heart was far from repentant. He may have changed his physical direction, but his hatred for Nineveh had not budged. Certainly, God knew the state of Jonah’s heart when He first called the prophet to preach against Nineveh, and He called Jonah anyway. He also knew the state of Jonah’s heart when He came to Jonah a second time, and He called Jonah anyway.

God is not only a God of second chances (and third, and fourth), He is an all-knowing God who chooses to use imperfect people to accomplish His perfect work. There is no such thing as a perfect minister. There are no flawless Christians who are worthy to be used by God. Though God chooses to involve His people in His purposes, God’s work is not dependent on people. The power of the gospel is wholly dependent on God’s perfect character.

He can (and does) use the disobedient runner to accomplish His purposes.

He can (and does) use the reluctant minister to proclaim His precepts.

He can (and does) use the hard-hearted soul to bring the gospel message to the nations.

He can (and does) use you for the work of His kingdom.

How does seeing the way God used Jonah—in spite of Jonah—free you up to obediently step into God’s work of taking the gospel to all peoples and nations?

DAY 4

READ:

Jonah 4:1-4

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Jonah 4:4

NOTES

Angry enough to die? Have you ever found yourself in that place before? Jesus expressed His anger while here on earth, as seen in His famous turning of tables in the temple court (Matt. 21:12-13). Psalm 7:11 and other passages tell us that God has righteous indignation (a fancy term for anger). So, while anger—a normal emotion—is not always a negative thing, what causes us to become angry very well might be.

In Jonah's case, his anger stemmed from a sinful place. In this first display of anger, Jonah was furious over the fact that God dared to show compassion to the Ninevites. Undoubtedly, Jonah's rage boiled up because he held on to hatred for his enemies. He did not believe they were worthy of God's mercy. He would rather have died than see these people receive forgiveness.

Most would say they do not hold on to hatred for a people group. Yet whether it be people of a particular ethnicity, those with a different political position, or individuals from a certain social class—the presence of anger toward others may reveal otherwise.

Whether big or small, many people hold on to prejudices that prove to affect our actions and attitudes. It may be hidden and unrealized, but they are there. And when God chooses to bless others and our anger rears its ugly head, that may be a signal that something within our hearts is not quite right.

Let's not be like Jonah in his anger and lack mercy. Let's strive to have a heart like God's, who desires all to have the opportunity to come to Him in repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

Whether you've been angry to the same degree as Jonah or not, it can be helpful to evaluate the root of your anger. Is it from a normal and right place, as in the case of a gross injustice? Or is it out of jealousy, pride, or prejudice?

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"God's too big for us to control. You can't pick and choose which of God's attributes you want to see displayed and when and where you want to experience them."¹

-Priscilla Shirer

DAY 5

READ:

Jonah 4:5-11

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Jonah 4:8

NOTES

In a society centered on pursuing comfort at all costs, it is often difficult to recognize how much outside influences shape our lives. Commercials constantly push the “fact” that we deserve various products. Companies build multi-million dollar marketing campaigns geared toward the felt needs of making life easier and more enjoyable. For example, while there is nothing wrong with choosing a comfortable pillow or cozy pajamas to give us better sleep, the pursuit of the “best” night’s sleep can sometimes become a non-negotiable in our lives. Whether it be a satisfying slumber, our favorite foods, or a haven at home, sometimes these good gifts from God become things we pursue more than God Himself.

When we examine our lives, we can see there are many practices in our day-to-day living that boil down to the pursuit of comfort, and these aren’t necessarily bad. But when those who claim to follow Christ sacrifice obedience to Him on the altar of leisure and convenience, we have a problem.

Jonah relished the comfort the vine provided. It brought him great pleasure, while he seethed over the mercy shown to his enemies. He would rather have died than be uncomfortable. He would rather have died than see his enemies receive spiritual comfort. These two realities are not unconnected. Creature comforts often distract us and distance us from the urgency of the Great Commission. Though we don’t have to forsake every convenience and pleasure to be obedient, we must be watchful for how these things can rob us of our focus. Instead of making the gifts of God our ultimate pursuit, we can use these comforts to provide rest and sustenance for a life of obedient service to God’s eternal purposes.

What are some creature comforts in your life that have become earthly distractions from God’s mission instead of provisions for our God-given eternal pursuits?

GROUP

NOTES

POINT 1: A wayward prophet leads others to worship the Lord (Jonah 1:10-16).

Instead of pointing others to the goodness of God through his _____, Jonah's selfish actions brought _____ to the pagan sailors.



How have you seen the decisions of Christ-followers positively or negatively affect unbelievers around them?

Despite Jonah's hard-heartedness, God still used him to reveal His _____ to the pagan sailors that they might _____ and _____ Him.

POINT 2: A stubborn prophet draws others to repent to the Lord (Jonah 3:1-5).

God pursues sinners for their _____ and their _____. He desires His people to obey and for _____ to come to repentance.

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #47: THE GOSPEL

The Bible teaches that the gospel is both an event and a story. First, it is an event that took place at a specific point in _____, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the redemption of sinners (1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 5:21). Second, the gospel is also the story of redemption that God has _____ since before the foundations of the earth (Eph. 1:4), which runs through Scripture, and which culminates in a restored and redeemed creation—a new heaven and new earth where sin, death, and suffering will never again plague humanity, and God's people will live with Him forever (Isa. 25:8; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21). The event and story do not exist apart from or in conflict

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Behind all our mission stands the unshakeable determination of God to be known throughout His whole creation as the living God."²

—Christopher Wright

with one another, but together inspire us to a life of _____ and _____ .

? Why might we give into the thought that some people are too far gone for God to redeem?

POINT 3: A hard-hearted prophet receives compassion from the Lord (Jonah 4:5-11).

The Lord had already used _____ to show Jonah compassion and to _____ his heart, and He did so again with a plant as an object _____ .

? What are some difficult lessons you have had to learn from the Lord?

As much as we might care about _____ , God cares even more about _____ made in His _____ that they repent and believe in Him.

? How might we grow in our desire to see all people repent and believe in Jesus?

MY RESPONSE

Because we were enemies who received God's grace and mercy, we break down walls and put to death our prejudices as we share the news with everyone that forgiveness is available through repentance and faith in Christ.

- **HEAD:** Who are some groups of people you need to see differently because God is a God of compassion?
- **HEART:** How will you seek to develop a compassionate heart for unbelievers in the world?
- **HANDS:** What is one way you will show the compassion of Jesus this week?

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"God breaks down walls and leads His people out into the world with good news: forgiveness is possible through repentance and faith. Tribal attitudes melt away when constantly exposed to the warm embrace of our missionary God."³

-Trevin Wax