

READ THIS FIRST

The Book of Jonah

Note from Pastor Luke Simmons

The mission of Second Mile Church is to “embody Jesus’ mission and message in every place that God sends us.” The reality is that sometimes God sends us to places and people that we’d rather avoid. If we’re honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that we find some people distasteful, offensive, wicked, ugly, and combative. It would be far more comfortable to stay near those we like, cozy inside the friendly confines of our shared opinions and values. But this “holy huddle” mentality, which is so common among the evangelical church today, is absolutely opposite of the nature of God himself and contradictory to the church’s purpose on earth.

God has always been a God of mission. The Bible as a whole is the story of God’s missionary activity to those who don’t deserve it. God’s missionary zeal finds its pinnacle in the person of Jesus who left the comfort of Heaven to inhabit a human culture and sacrifice himself for the sake of those he was sent to. As Jesus’ followers, the church is now to carry on the work of mission so that people from every tongue, tribe, and nation may come to know and love the One True God.

Jonah is a relatively short story designed to: 1) demonstrate the foolishness of disobeying God, 2) proclaim the reality that God is aggressively seeking those who are far from him, and 3) convict God’s people who are often indifferent and unaffected by the plight of lost people.

My prayer for this series is that God will use it to help you to see that obedience is always the best thing, to remember that God is eager to use you in his mission, and to feel love and compassion for those who are far from God.

This study guide, designed for individual study or for use in Community Groups, is intended to help us dive deeper into the Scripture and apply the things we learn. The Bible calls us to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). These study guides are designed to help us not just hear the word on Sunday, but put it into practice Monday through Saturday.

Because the Tomb is Empty,

Luke Simmons
Lead Pastor

The Format

Each study begins with a **key verse** that summarizes the truth found in the entire section. These key verses, if memorized, would allow you to learn the big ideas found in Jonah. Then there is an **introduction** to the passage that you can use for review or, if you miss a Sunday, you can track with us wherever we are. Next are some questions for **investigation** (getting into the text) and **implication** (applying these truths to daily life). Each study concludes with a section on **other issues**, which expand on any other issues or questions raised by the passage that we may not take time to cover during the sermon.

Suggestions for Individuals

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to see what he is saying in the Bible and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study and write out answers to the questions.
- Resist any temptation to skip over the **implication** section. It is important to ponder how the truths apply to your life. Though these questions are sometimes penetrating and difficult, they are designed to help you think seriously about your life.
- Take what opportunities you can to share with others about what you’ve learned and how you’d like your life to change as a result.

Suggestions for Community Groups

- It is recommended that you study the passage *after* it has been preached. This way you can discuss the issues raised by the sermon as well as the study itself.
- In your time together as a community, focus on the **implications** for your lives individually and as a group. Share with one another how you sense God calling you to change, pray for one another about these things, and invite one another to encourage you and hold you accountable to apply the truth.
- In your time together as a community, use this guide as a launching point for discussion and care for one another. Resist the urge to try to discuss every question or “get through the material.”

Questions or Comments?

If you have feedback or questions about the series or studies, please feel free to email them to info@secondmilechurch.com.

GETTING TO KNOW JONAH

An Introduction to the Book of Jonah¹

Author and Title

The title of the book is the name of the main character, Jonah. The book is anonymous, and there are no indicators elsewhere in Scripture to identify the author. The foundational source for the book was likely Jonah's own telling of the story after his return from Nineveh.

Date

Since Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (782–753 b.c.; see 2 Kings 14:23–28), and since *Sirach* 49:10 (from the 2nd century b.c.) refers to the “twelve prophets” (namely, the 12 Minor Prophets, of which Jonah is the fifth), the book of Jonah was written sometime between the middle of the eighth and the end of the third centuries. No compelling evidence leads to a more precise date.

Theme

The Lord is a God of boundless compassion not just for “us” (Jonah and the Israelites) but also for “them” (the pagan sailors and Ninevites).

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

The primary purpose of the book of Jonah is to engage readers in theological reflection on the compassionate character of God, and in self-reflection on the degree to which their own character reflects this compassion, to the end that they become vehicles of this compassion in the world that God has made and so deeply cares about.

Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–28), who ruled in Israel (the northern kingdom) from 782 to 753 b.c. Jeroboam was the grandson of Jehoahaz, who ruled in Israel from 814 to 798 b.c. Because of the sins of Jehoahaz, Israel was oppressed by the Arameans (2 Kings 13:3). But because of the Lord's great compassion (2 Kings 13:4, 23), Israel was spared destruction and delivered from this oppression (2 Kings 13:5). This deliverance came through a “savior” (2 Kings 13:5), who may have been Adad-nirari III (810–783 b.c.), king of Assyria.

Jeroboam's father, Jehoash (798–782 b.c.), capitalized on this freedom from Aramean oppression and began to expand Israel's boundaries, recapturing towns taken during the reign of Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:25). Though Jeroboam “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 14:24), he nevertheless expanded Israel even farther than his father did, matching the boundaries in the days of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:25); this was “according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher” (2 Kings 14:25). Thus Jonah witnessed firsthand the restorative compassion of God extended to his wayward people.

In God's providence, the expansion by Jeroboam was made easier because of Assyrian weakness. The Assyrians were engaged in conflicts with the Arameans and the Urartians. There was also widespread famine, and numerous revolts within the Assyrian Empire (where regional governors ruled with a fair degree of autonomy). Then there was an auspicious eclipse of the sun during the reign of Ashur-dan III (771–754 b.c.). This convergence of events supports the plausibility of the Ninevites being so responsive to Jonah's call to repent.

It was not until some years later that Tiglath-pileser (745–727 b.c.) would gain control and reestablish Assyrian dominance in the area, and his son Shalmaneser V (727–722) was the king responsible for the conquest of Israel and the destruction of Samaria in 722. Thus Jonah prophesied in an era when Assyria was not an immediate threat to Israel and when Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity because of the compassion of God.

Genre

The genre of Jonah is debated. The book has been read as an *allegory*, using fictional figures to symbolize some other reality. According to this interpretation, Jonah is a symbol of Israel in its refusal to carry out God's mission to the nations. The primary argument against this view is that Jonah is clearly presented as a historical and not a fictional figure (see the specific historical and geographical details in 1:1–3; 3:2–10; 4:11; cf. also 2 Kings 14:25). Another proposal is that the book is a *parable* to teach believers not to be like Jonah. Like allegories, parables are also based on fictional and not historical characters. Parables, however, are typically simple tales that make a single point, whereas the book of Jonah is quite complex and teaches a multiplicity of themes.

The book of Jonah has all the marks of a *prophetic narrative*, like those about Elijah and Elisha found in 1 Kings, which set out to report actual historical events. The phrase that opens the book (“the word of the Lord came to”) is also at the beginning of the first two stories told about Elijah (1 Kings 17:2, 8) and is used in other prophetic narratives as well (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 7:4). Just as the Elijah and Elisha narratives contain extraordinary events, like ravens providing bread and meat for the prophet (1 Kings 17:6), so does the book of Jonah, as when the fish “provides transportation” for the prophet. In fact, the story of Jonah is so much like the stories about Elijah and Elisha that one would hardly think it odd if the story of Jonah were

¹This introduction is taken from *The ESV Study Bible* and written by Mark D. Futado, a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando)

embedded in 2 Kings right after Jonah's prophetic words about the expansion of the kingdom. The story of Jonah is thus presented as historical, like the other prophetic narratives.

There are additional arguments for the historical nature of the book of Jonah. It is difficult to say that the story teaches God's sovereignty over the creation if God did not in fact "appoint" the fish (1:17), the plant (4:6), the worm (4:7), and the east wind (4:8) to do his will. Jesus, moreover, treated the story as historical when he used elements of the story as analogies for other historical events (see Matt. 12:40–41). This is especially clear when Jesus declared that "the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah" (Matt. 12:41).

The story of Jonah is not, however, history for history's sake. The book is clearly *didactic* (as the allegorical and parabolic interpretations rightly affirm); that is, the story is told *to teach the reader key lessons*. The didactic character of the book shines through in the repeated use of questions, 11 out of 14 being addressed to Jonah, and the question that closes the narrative leaves readers asking themselves how they will respond to the story.

Key Themes

The primary theme in Jonah is that God's compassion is boundless, not limited just to "us" but also available for "them." This is clear from the flow of the story and its conclusion: (1) Jonah is the object of God's compassion throughout the book, and the pagan sailors and pagan Ninevites are also the benefactors of this compassion. (2) The story ends with the question, "Should I not pity Nineveh . . . ?" (4:11). Tied to this theological teaching is the anthropological question, Do readers of the story have hearts that are like the heart of God? While Jonah was concerned about a plant that "perished" (4:10), he showed no such concern for the Ninevites. Conversely, the pagan sailors (1:14), their captain (1:6), and the king of Nineveh (3:9) all showed concern that human beings, including Jonah, not "perish."

Several other major themes in the book include:

1. God's sovereign control over events on the earth
2. God's determination to get his message to the nations
3. The need for repentance from sin in general
4. The need for repentance from self-centeredness and hypocrisy in particular
5. The full assurance that God will relent when people repent

Preparing the Way for Christ in Jonah

Jonah's rescue from death provides an analogy for the resurrection of Christ (Matt. 12:39–40). The repentance of the Ninevites anticipates the wide-scale repentance of Gentiles in the messianic era (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 24:47).

1:15 The saving of mariners through the sacrifice of Jonah prefigures the salvation of all nations through the death of Christ (1 John 2:2).

1:17 Jonah is under the sea, symbolizing the realm of death. His state prefigures the death of Christ (Matt. 12:40).

2:6 Jonah's rescue from death prefigures the resurrection of Christ from the dead (Matt. 12:40).

3:5 Gentiles repent in response to the preaching of Jonah, who figuratively has been raised from the "death" of the belly of the fish. Gentiles repent in response to the preaching of the resurrection of Christ (Matt. 28:18–20).

3:10 The repentance of Gentiles contrasts with the repeated lack of repentance on the part of Israel (Matt. 12:41; 21:43).

4:11 God's mercy is shown abundantly in the gospel and in the salvation of Gentiles who deserve nothing (Rom. 9:30–31; 11:30).

Literary Features

The book of Jonah is a literary masterpiece. While the story line is so simple that children follow it readily, the story is marked by as high a degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible. The author employs structure, humor, hyperbole, irony, double entendre, and literary figures like merism to communicate his message with great rhetorical power. The first example of this sophistication is seen in the outline of the book (see below).

The main category for the book is satire—the exposure of human vice or folly. The four elements of satire take the following form in the book of Jonah: (1) the *object of attack* is Jonah and what he represents—a bigotry and ethnocentrism that regarded God as the exclusive property of the believing community (in the OT, the nation of Israel); (2) the *satiric vehicle* is narrative or story; (3) the *satiric norm* or standard by which Jonah's bad attitudes are judged is the character of God, who is portrayed as a God of universal mercy, whose mercy is not limited by national boundaries; (4) the *satiric tone* is laughing, with Jonah emerging as a laughable figure—someone who runs away from God and is caught by a fish, and as a childish and pouting prophet who prefers death over life without his shade tree.

Three stylistic techniques are especially important. (1) The *giantesque motif*—the motif of the unexpectedly large (e.g., the magnitude of the task assigned to Jonah, of the fish that swallows him, and of the repentance that Jonah's eight-word sermon accomplishes). (2) A *pervasive irony* (e.g., the ironic discrepancy between

Jonah's prophetic vocation and his ignominious behavior, and the ironic impossibility of fleeing from the presence of God). (3) *Humor*, as Jonah's behavior is not only ignominious but also ridiculous.

The Setting of Jonah

c. 760 b.c. Jonah prophesied during the politically prosperous time of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:23–28). During this time the Assyrians were occupied with matters elsewhere in the empire, allowing Jeroboam II to capture much of Syria for Israel. The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment upon it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord's calling by sailing from the seaport of Joppa to Tarshish, which was probably in the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and traveled overland to Nineveh at the heart of the Assyrian Empire.



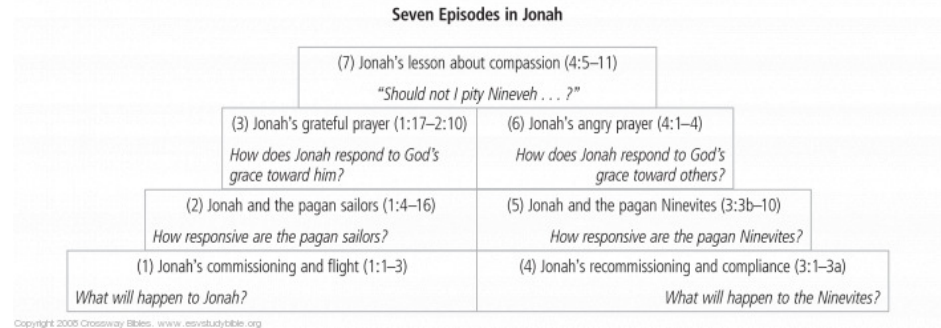
Outline

The story of Jonah unfolds in seven episodes (see diagram):

- A. Jonah's commissioning and flight (1:1–3)
- B. Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4–16)
- C. Jonah's grateful prayer (1:17–2:10)
- A'. Jonah's recommissioning and compliance (3:1–3a)
- B'. Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3b–10)
- C'. Jonah's angry prayer (4:1–4)
- D. Jonah's lesson about compassion (4:5–11)

The first three episodes are paralleled by the second three. By this paralleling the author invites the reader to make a number of comparisons and contrasts, which will be drawn out in the notes. The final episode is unparalleled and thus stands out as the climax of the story, ending with the penetrating question, "And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Seven Episodes in Jonah



Week 1

RUNNING FROM GOD'S CALL

Jonah 1:1-3

.....
*But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the
Lord...*

.....
(Jonah 1:3, ESV)
.....

Introduction

Christianity is more than rules to keep and sins to avoid. Though many people often want to reduce Christianity to do's and don'ts, it is truly about a dynamic personal relationship with God.

This insistence on relating to God by grace rather than on the basis of our obedience to his rules has often led to a concern that people will abuse grace and just live any way they want (Paul dealt with this objection in Romans 6). But true heart-changing grace will always result in obedience to God that comes *from the heart*. As Paul wrote in Romans 6:17, "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed."

Biblical Christianity is not based on religion ("I obey, therefore I'm accepted"), but on the gospel ("I'm accepted in Jesus, therefore I obey"). The more we are changed by the gospel the more we will *want* to obey the Lord.

The first part of the book of Jonah is a great study in the importance of obedience. Like a stubborn toddler who insists on his own way, Jonah blatantly disobeys God and foolishly tries to escape the presence of the Lord. May this study demonstrate to those who have experienced gospel-grace that God still expects us to obey him and, thanks Jesus' work on our behalf, gives us the power to do it.

Investigation

Read Jonah 1:1-3.

1. How does God describe Nineveh?
2. What words or phrases are repeated multiple times throughout these first three verses? What point is the author trying to make through this repetition?
3. What does it mean that Jonah was going "away from the presence of the Lord" (v. 3)?
4. Locate Nineveh and Tarshish on the map in the "Getting to Know Jonah" section of this study guide. What insight does this provide in regards to Jonah's obedience to the Lord's command?

Implication

1. It is quite common for people today to do things that they *know* are wrong. Even those who don't affirm God's truth would still say that they knowingly do things that violate even their own consciences. What are some reasons that people do things that are in clear contradiction to what is right?

2. Jonah could have tried to justify his disobedience by saying something like, "Those Ninevites are so evil and wicked that I might be injured or killed if I go speak against them. Surely God wouldn't want that to happen to me. Surely he wouldn't call me to do something like that." In what ways do Christians sometimes wrongly justify disobedience to God's commands?

3. What was a time that you were living as though you were trying to flee from the presence of the Lord? What contributed to that errant thinking?

4. What is something that God has clearly commanded you to do that you are unwilling to do? What will you do about it?

Other Issues

Are Christians called to confront the sinful wickedness of the culture?

The starting point for the church's relation to culture is affirmation: we live in solidarity with our cultural contemporaries. Since God loved the world, we must too. This positive affirmation does not, however, lessen the deep sense of what Lesslie Newbigin calls the "unbearable tension" that comes from being a member of two communities anchored in "two different and incompatible stories." This "unbearable tension" exists between the gospel and the cultural story. Hendrik Kramer believes that if the church is to be faithful, it must cultivate an awareness of this tension and fully embrace it. Yet many Christians in Western culture have lost this sense of tension between the gospel and their cultural story. This may occur when we begin to accept, consciously or otherwise, the myth that contemporary Western culture is really a "Christian" culture and so poses no threat to Christian faith. But that is indeed a myth: no culture is (or ever has been) truly Christian. We may also lose the healthy sense of the tension between the gospel and culture by accepting another dominant myth of our time: that contemporary culture is religiously neutral, either because it is secular or pluralistic. Yet this too is a myth, for Western culture (like all human cultures) has been shaped by ultimate beliefs. As Newbigin puts it, "No state can be completely secular in the sense that those who exercise power have no beliefs about what is true and no commitments to what they believe to be right. It is the duty of the church to ask what those beliefs and commitments are and to expose them to the light of the gospel."²

²Michael W Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 134.