

Small Group Guide: The Book of Jonah



Overview

This guide is designed to help your group dig deeper into the themes from the book of Jonah -- obedience, repentance, the illusion of control, and how God's mercy extends even to our enemies. Use the questions and applications below to spark honest conversation and personal reflection.

Key Takeaways

- **We do not give up control when we submit to God -- we give up the illusion of control.** As the pastor put it: "It's really not giving up control. It's giving up the illusion of control to submit and follow Christ."
- **The book of Jonah is far richer than the story of a fish.** It contains striking parallels to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus -- including sacrifice for others, three days in the grave, and the imagery of baptism.
- **Repentance means stepping down from the throne of your own life.** The king of Nineveh physically removed his royal robe and sat in sackcloth and ashes -- a vivid picture of what genuine humility before God looks like.

- **Our perspective is often too small.** Jonah was so consumed by his own preferences and prejudices that he cared more about a plant that existed for one day than about 120,000 people made in God's image.
 - **People who seem like enemies are still image-bearers of God.** Christ died for them just as he died for us, and our sin required the same sacrifice theirs did.
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Discussion Questions

Opening

1. When you first heard the story of Jonah growing up, what stood out to you most? How has your understanding of the book changed after this sermon?
 2. The pastor described Jonah as fleeing "from the presence of the Lord." Have you ever found yourself running from something God was calling you to do? What did that season look like?
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Digging Deeper

3. The pastor pointed out that Jonah knew God would show mercy to Nineveh -- that is actually why he ran. What does it reveal about Jonah's character that he understood God's grace but resented it being extended to his enemies?
4. Consider the parallel between Jonah giving up his life for the sailors and Jesus giving up his life for us. The pastor noted that when Jonah offered himself, the men on the boat came to believe in the one true God. How does sacrifice open the door to faith, both in this story and in your own experience?
5. The pastor described baptism as a picture that did not originate in the New Testament -- pointing to Jonah going down into the waters (which he called the grave) and coming up again with a new willingness to obey. How does understanding that imagery deepen your appreciation for what baptism represents?
6. The king of Nineveh removed his royal robe and sat in ashes. The pastor said: "We often want to sit in the throne of our own lives." What are some practical ways people today hold onto the throne of their own lives even while claiming to follow God?

7. God asked Jonah twice: "Is it right for you to be angry?" When you bring complaints to God, how often are those complaints rooted in self-interest rather than a concern for what God values? What does it take to recognize that difference?
 8. Jonah was furious over the loss of a plant that existed for one day, yet felt no compassion for 120,000 people. The pastor asked: "How often are our priorities really screwed up?" Where do you see misplaced priorities showing up in your own life or in the broader culture?
 9. The pastor drew a parallel between Jonah's attitude toward the Ninevites and the way people today view those with opposing political or ideological views. He said: "Ideas might be enemies, but people are made in God's image and we should love the person anyway." Do you find that distinction easy or difficult to hold in practice? Why?
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Personal Reflection

10. The Ninevites repented immediately and completely -- from the greatest to the least -- when they heard the message. Is there an area of your life where God has been speaking and you have been slow to respond? What is holding you back?
 11. The pastor noted that even in Jonah's rebellion and bad attitude, God still provided shade through the plant. Have you ever experienced God's blessing in a season of disobedience? What did that reveal to you about God's character -- and did it help or hinder your growth?
 12. Jonah ultimately completed his mission, and 120,000 people turned to God because of it. Yet Jonah ended the story bitter and sitting outside the city. Is it possible to be used by God and still miss the joy of what God is doing? What keeps a person from fully entering into God's purposes?
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Practical Applications

- **Identify your Nineveh.** Is there a person, group, or situation God has been nudging you toward that you have been avoiding? Take a specific step this week to move toward it rather than away from it.
- **Examine your throne.** Spend time in prayer this week asking God to reveal areas where you are still sitting in the seat of control. Confess those areas and practice releasing them, one at a time.

- **Engage someone you have written off.** Think of someone whose ideology, lifestyle, or choices have caused you to distance yourself. Look for one opportunity this week to treat that person with genuine compassion, remembering that Christ's sacrifice was made for them just as it was made for you.
 - **Reflect on your baptism.** If you have been baptized, take time this week to revisit what that moment meant -- the death of the old life, the burial in the water, and the resurrection into new life. If you have not been baptized as a believer, consider talking to your pastor about what that step would mean for you.
 - **Check your complaints.** The next time you find yourself frustrated with God over a circumstance, pause and ask honestly: "Is it right for me to be angry?" Write down your answer and what it reveals about your perspective versus God's.
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Closing Prayer Focus

Close your group time by praying together over these themes:

- Gratitude for a God who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness -- even when we run
- Humility to step down from the throne of our own lives and trust God's purposes
- Compassion for people we have been tempted to view as enemies
- Courage to carry the truth to places and people we would rather avoid

5-Day Bible Reading Plan and Devotional Guide

Based on the Book of Jonah: Running, Repenting, and Returning



Day 1: The Illusion of Control

Reading: Jonah 1:1-3; Proverbs 19:21

Devotional: Jonah received a clear word from God and ran the other direction. His flight toward Tarshish was not simply geographic rebellion — it was a declaration that he believed his own plan was better than God's. We do the same thing. We craft our own routes, purchase our own tickets, and convince ourselves we are in control. But as the pastor reminded us, we are not giving up control when we surrender to God. We are giving up the illusion of it. True freedom begins the moment we stop pretending the throne of our lives was ever ours to occupy.

Reflection: Where in your life are you currently running from something God has clearly called you toward?

Day 2: The Sacrifice That Calms the Storm

Reading: Jonah 1:11-16; Romans 5:6-8

Devotional: Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard. He offered his life so that others might be spared. When they did, the sea went calm, and those pagan sailors made vows to the Lord. This moment is a striking shadow of the gospel. Jesus, perfectly obedient where Jonah was not, gave His life so that the storm of God's righteous judgment against sin would cease for all who believe. The sailors who witnessed Jonah's sacrifice believed in the one true God because of it. People around you are watching. Your willingness to lay down your own agenda for the sake of others may be the very thing that points them toward Christ.

Reflection: Is there a relationship in your life where self-sacrifice could open a door for someone to encounter God?

Day 3: The Grave, the Waters, and the New Life

Reading: Jonah 2:1-9; Romans 6:3-5

Devotional: From inside the fish, Jonah did not say he was in the sea. He said he was in Sheol — the grave. His prayer from the deep is a portrait of death and resurrection. He went down into the waters in disobedience and came up declaring, "Salvation is of the Lord." This is the very picture that baptism represents in the life of a believer. Going under the water is a burial of the old self. Coming up out of the water is a declaration of resurrection life in Christ. Jonah's journey through the deep reminds us that God does not abandon us in our lowest moments. He meets us there and brings us up.

Reflection: Have you ever experienced a season that felt like the grave? How did God bring you up out of it?

Day 4: The King Who Left His Throne

Reading: Jonah 3:5-10; Philippians 2:5-8

Devotional: When Jonah's message reached Nineveh, the king of the most powerful empire in the region did something remarkable. He stepped down from his throne, removed his royal robe, covered himself in sackcloth, and sat in ashes. He surrendered his position and his pride before God. This is the posture of genuine repentance. We were never meant to sit on the throne of our own lives. Repentance is not simply feeling sorry. It is the deliberate act of stepping down, laying aside what we have claimed as our own, and submitting to the lordship of Christ. The king of Nineveh understood something many of us still resist: humility before God is not weakness. It is wisdom.

Reflection: What robe are you still wearing that God is asking you to lay aside?

Day 5: 120,000 People and One Plant

Reading: Jonah 4:6-11; Matthew 22:37-39

Devotional: God closed the book of Jonah with a question, not an answer. Jonah grieved the loss of a plant that existed for one day while showing no compassion for 120,000 people made in the image of God. God's question hangs in the air: should I not care about them? It hangs in our air too. It is easy to reduce people to their ideology, their politics, or their failures and decide they are not worth our concern. But Christ went to the cross for every one of them. Their sin required the same sacrifice that ours did. We are called not to endorse every idea, but to love every person — because every person carries the image of the God who first loved us.

Reflection: Is there a person or group of people you have written off? How might God be calling you to see them differently?