

Lesson 97

God Sends Jonah

God used Jonah to show grace to the wicked people of Nineveh.

Overview

Lesson Focus

God commanded his prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn the people of coming judgment for their wickedness. But Jonah disobeyed and took a ship in the opposite direction. God used a storm and a great fish to bring Jonah to repentance and obedience. Jonah delivered God's message to the people of Nineveh. The people asked God for mercy, and God spared them.

Key Passages

Jonah 1:1–3, 1:17, 3:3–5, 3:10, 4:1–3, 4:11; Matthew 12:38–41

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe Jonah's response to God calling him to Nineveh.
- Describe how God showed his grace to Jonah and Nineveh.

Memory Verse

Proverbs 3:11–12 My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

Prepare to Share

Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

Jonah was a prophet of God who was called to prophesy to the 10 tribes of Israel. However, his acclaim doesn't come from his association with Israel but rather from his encounter with God, a great fish, and the Ninevites. The capital of Assyria, Nineveh, was believed to have been one of the largest cities in the world at the time. The people there were known for godlessness, idolatry, and cruelty. The Jews despised these pagan Gentiles—and Jonah was no exception.

That seems to be why Jonah ran the other direction when God called him to warn the Ninevites of their wickedness and of God's impending punishment. He despised the Ninevites and did not want God to forgive them (Jonah 4:2). Jonah's escape route led him to a ship bound for Tarshish (modern-day Spain) (Jonah 1:3). But could Jonah really outrun God? Of course not. God's purpose will never be subverted.

In fact, Jonah's rebellion and flight led to a revelation of God's complete sovereignty and omnipotence over every circumstance and over all of his creation. In pursuit of Jonah, the Lord sent a great wind on the sea. A great storm arose, and the ship headed for Tarshish was about to be broken up (Jonah 1:4). Not only that, but the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah when he was thrown overboard (Jonah 1:17). Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. This is a God that cannot be outrun or outwitted! Finally, Jonah prayed to the Lord in humble submission, in sincere repentance, and with an earnest request for God's mercy and grace. The Lord heard his prayer and spoke to the fish, which vomited the prophet out onto the ground (Jonah 2).

God faithfully answered Jonah's prayer for mercy. God saved him from drowning, preserved him in the fish, and then offered him another opportunity to go to the Ninevites and preach the message of judgment. This time, Jonah obeyed!

Jonah cried out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). God again demonstrated his abundant grace and mercy—this time to the sinful, rebellious, and despicable Ninevites. The people of Nineveh—from the greatest to the least—believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth as a sign of their repentance. God saw that they turned from their evil ways, and he relented and did not bring the destruction he had planned (Jonah 3:10).

Jonah, however, did not rejoice at the Assyrians' repentance. In fact, he was so angry that he asked God to kill him. He told God that he fled to Tarshish because he knew God was gracious and merciful. Jonah didn't want to see the Ninevites forgiven. As he was sitting outside the city, waiting to see what would become of them and hoping for the worst, God caused a plant to grow to shade the prophet. Jonah was grateful for the plant, but then God killed the plant by sending a worm to attack it. God caused the day to become extremely hot, and Jonah asked to die. God responded by contrasting Jonah's pity for a mere plant he did nothing to cultivate with the compassion God had shown the city of Nineveh.

Jonah had received a clear message from God and knew that he should obey, but instead he chose to sin by disregarding God's command to go to Nineveh. God required his obedience, so Jonah went begrudgingly. As a prophet, Jonah's job was to call people to repentance, but he was hostile toward sharing the gospel with the pagan Gentiles of Nineveh and was displeased that God would indeed save them (Jonah 4:1–2). We see a great inconsistency in Jonah's thought process here. He understood enough about God to know that he was gracious and merciful, but he thought it would be possible to run from God.

Throughout the ages, God has used his people to deliver the message of repentance and forgiveness in Christ, and he is still doing so today. He is sovereign in his purposes. Jonah could not run from the job God had assigned him and was given a second chance to obey. God disciplines those he loves and is merciful to those who repent.

Historical/Apologetics Background

Jonah was a prophet from the region of Galilee, the city of Gath-hepher near Nazareth (2 Kings 14:25). We know that his father was a man named Amittai, but nothing else about the family is recorded in Scripture. Although some scholars claim Jonah was not a real person, Jesus himself referred to Jonah. On at least two occasions (Matthew 12:39–41, 16:4), Jesus used Jonah as an example of a call to repentance and as a sign of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees that "as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). Undoubtedly, Jesus regarded Jonah as a historical figure, and he regarded Jonah's experiences in the fish and his preaching to Nineveh as real events.

The Assyrians were descendants of Shem's son Asshur who settled in the North and occupied various places throughout the centuries. Around 1100 BC, Assyria rose to power in Mesopotamia and later declined. During this period of decline, around 800 BC, God sent Jonah to Nineveh. The city was known for its immorality and cruelty, and it is truly a miracle of God's grace that the people turned from their wickedness—but the repentance didn't continue in future generations. Later prophecies would be delivered against the Ninevites from Nahum, and God would judge them for their wickedness.

Under the leadership of Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Kings 16:7), Assyria began to influence Israel. Eventually, the Assyrians would conquer the northern tribes and take them into captivity. After the fall of Samaria in 721 BC, the Israelites lost control of that region for many centuries. The Assyrian kings began to carry the Jews away from their land and brought new leaders from their own culture to Israel. This advanced the practice of the Jews intermarrying with the Assyrians and other foreigners. Because of this intermarrying, they were considered traitors by those who had remained in Judah, causing tension between the Samaritans and the Jews, which continued well past the time of Christ.

Limited License to Reproduce

A limited, non-exclusive, non-transferable, nonsublicensable license is hereby granted to a single local church or organization to print copies of the PDF materials in the Teacher Digital Resources if 1) you are the original purchaser; 2) you are using the copies for noncommercial purposes (such as for teaching in class) exclusively within your single local church or organization (multi-campus churches, and national/regional denominations are not covered under this license); and 3) you follow the instructions provided in the curriculum pertaining to the printable materials.

This license is for the specific purchaser of the product and does not include affiliated groups or organizations, or other churches or groups in the same denomination as the purchaser, not identified as the actual purchaser. There is no limit to the number of printed copies for use within the single local church or organization which is the actual purchaser. None of the material in this curriculum may be reproduced for any commercial promotion, advertising, or sale of a product or service, or to share with any other persons, churches, groups, or organizations.

The media (audio/video) portions are copyrighted and duplication is prohibited. This license is for materials in the Teacher Digital Resources only and does NOT include reproduction rights for pre-printed teacher books, student guides, student take home sheets, or posters, except on an emergency basis when purchased quantities are not sufficient for a given week.

Bible Version

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.