



JONAH



WELCOME TO *JONAH*

Few stories from the Bible have captured the imagination of surrounding culture as the story of Jonah, but few know what to do with it. Everyone can recall that Jonah was swallowed by a fish, but who knows “why”?

Even within Christianity, this pithy little story has given pause. Let’s face it, it doesn’t resemble any of the other prophetic books. It’s short, even truncated at times. Some scholars have identified it as an allegory of Israel, while others claim that its genre is best understood as parable, legend, or even satire. So, what should we do with it?

Jonah is a story that invites the hearer to understand the heart of the Creator of the universe, and compare it to the heart of humanity. It calls the listener into a struggle between reconciliation and revenge. If we look at Jesus’ words cen-

turies later, Jonah can give us a foretaste of the ancient, long-suffering, and generous character of this God:

“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.”

—Luke 6:27-28, 32

Scripture is clear: God will gather the nations to Himself, including those that we may not like. Jonah challenges us to join God in His mission, and trust that His judgment and generosity will be apportioned exactly as required.

Because without His forbearance, mercy, and forgiveness, we would all be swallowed and scuttled down into the depths of destruction.

“Now the word of the **LORD** came to **JONAH** the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to **NINEVEH**, that great city, and call out against it, for their **EVIL** has come up before me.” But Jonah rose to **FLEE** to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a **SHIP** going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, **AWAY** from the **PRESENCE** of the Lord.”

Jonah 1:1-3

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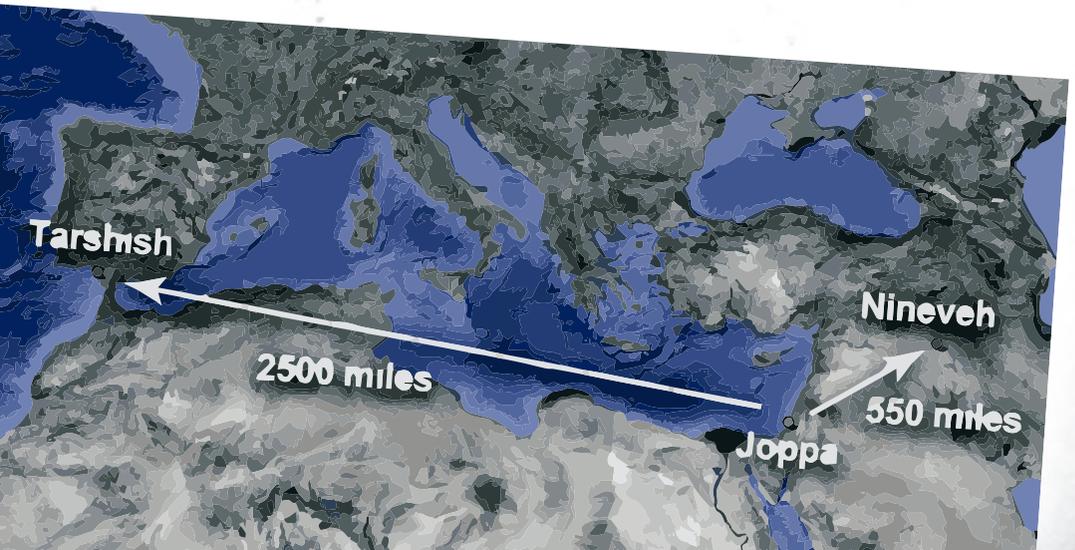
Historical **BACKGROUND.**

We cannot start the story of Jonah without laying some essential groundwork. The Book of Jonah is likely based upon the same Jonah, son of Amittai found in 2 Kings 14:25. This is the only other reference to this mysterious prophet. In it, he is said to have prophesied during the reign of King Jeroboam II, a wicked and unfaithful king who reigned during the 8th century, B.C. Other than this, we know nothing about Jonah besides what we learn in the book bearing his name.

The author of the book is a mystery as well; it is formally anonymous, and there is no biblical reference that identifies its author.

The locations of Tarshish, Israel, and Nineveh are helpful in recognizing the magnitude of Jonah's journeys, as well as the magnitude of his disobedience.

In the Book of Jonah, YHWH sends Jonah to Nineveh which is the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Both the Bible and historical studies provide significant evidence of Assyrian military

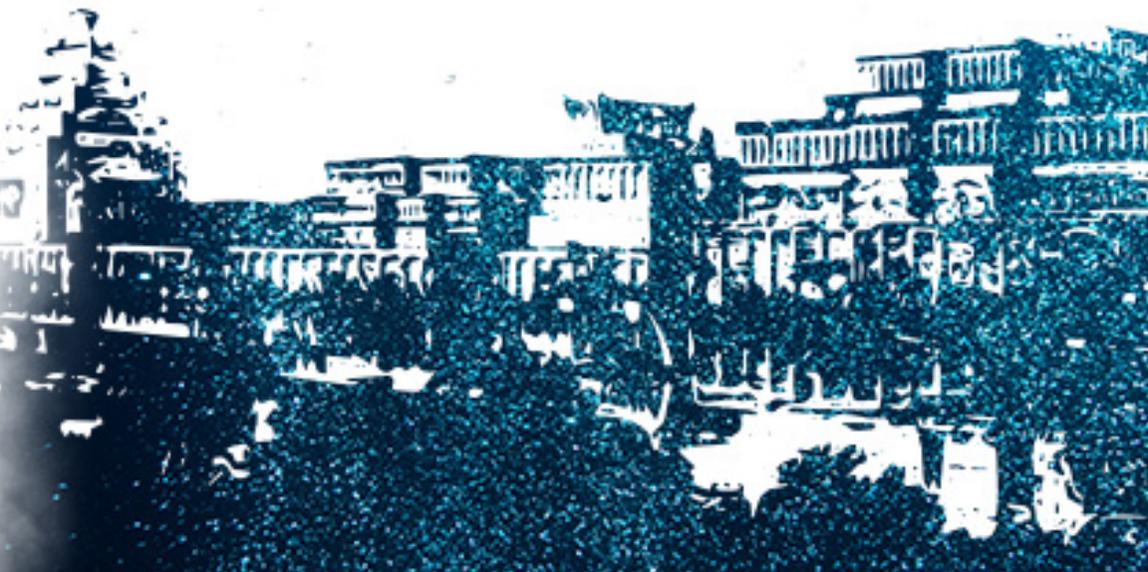


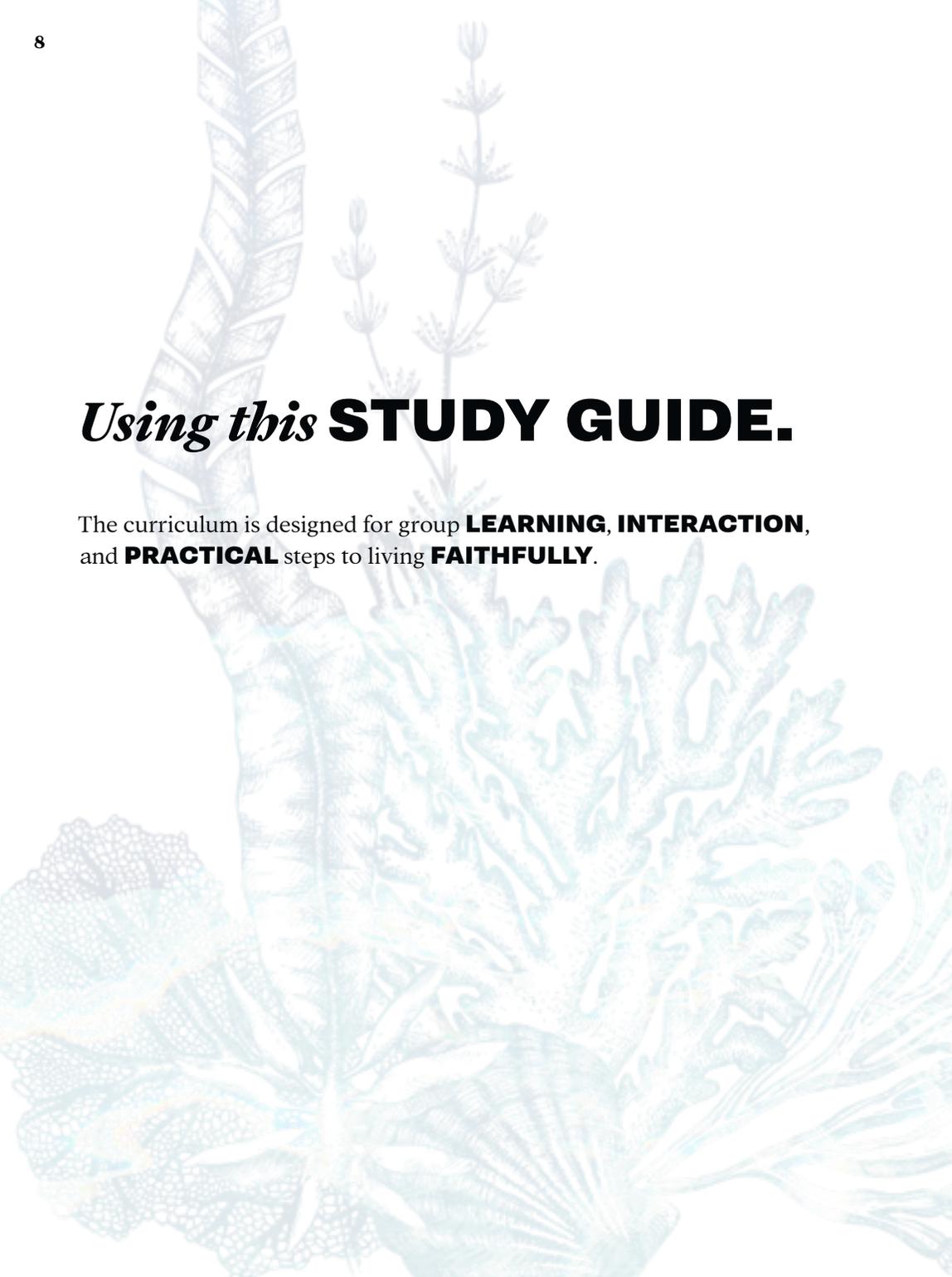
conquest in Mesopotamia and in the surrounding areas. This stretch of land at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean included Israel's Promised Land that had been unified under King David. At the time of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (912-612 BC), Israel had fragmented into two nations; the Northern Kingdom, which continued to be called Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, which was referred to as Judah. Over several years and several successive Assyrian monarchs, the Northern Kingdom and its capital in Samaria finally fell in 722 B.C. resulting in the deportation of Israelites to Assyria and the regions in their control. The Assyrians were infamous for their brutality and violence.

But this was all to come later. At the likely time of Jonah's life and

prophetic ministry, Assyria was in a weaker state, internationally. During the reign of Jeroboam II, Assyria was involved in ongoing conflicts with the Aramean and Urartian peoples, and also suffered from famines and internal revolts. Despite their future rise to power and conquest of Israel, it is likely that the story we are about to read is set during a period when Assyria was not yet an immediate threat to Israel's peace and prosperity.

From a literary standpoint, the book of Jonah is a masterpiece. The basic storyline is simple and easy to follow – simple enough that most people who grew up attending Sunday School will likely remember it – and yet it is packed with a stunning number of elegant rhetorical and literary devices for such a short book.



A detailed botanical illustration in a light blue-green color serves as the background for the page. It features a variety of plant parts: a large, textured stem on the left; a central stem with small, star-shaped flowers; a large, intricate, branching structure resembling coral or a complex leaf system in the middle; and several large, detailed leaves at the bottom, some showing fine vein patterns and others with a more textured surface.

Using this **STUDY GUIDE.**

The curriculum is designed for group **LEARNING, INTERACTION,**
and **PRACTICAL** steps to living **FAITHFULLY.**

This guide is separated into the following sections:

FIRST THOUGHTS

These are simple ice-breaker questions. They are to engage your group into the conversation about Jonah.

THE TEXT

Read through the Bible text together. This is important to get the feel of the Jonah narrative. Take turns if necessary, but make sure to read the text aloud.

OPENING PARAGRAPH

The opening thought is to be read aloud as well. It will give you a starting point before going into the questions for the study.

STORY REFLECTIONS

This section includes a series of questions designed to help you think through the text, how it may relate to other similar texts in the Bible, and provide a bridge to think about how these truths should impact us now.

CHOICES AHEAD

Applying what we learn is often difficult, but critical.

DON'T SKIP THIS OPPORTUNITY. Read this

section together at the end of your study and take action.

Throughout your week, consider what you have learned and what is being asked. Pray about the week's study. Every day presents choices. Ask God to help you be obedient and seek His desires for you and those around you. Don't forget to use other group members to keep you accountable.

FIRST THOUGHTS

What are the most memorable parts of the Jonah story from your youth?

What do you think is the purpose of Jonah being in the Bible?

Running **AWAY**

JONAH ONE

Jonah Flees the Presence of the Lord

¹Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” ³But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

⁴But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty

tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.

But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶ So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

Jonah Is Thrown into the Sea

⁷ And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

⁸ Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" ⁹ And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." ¹⁰ Then the

men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

¹¹ Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they called out to the Lord, "O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

A Great Fish Swallows Jonah

¹⁷ And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

“
And the LORD appointed a great FISH to SWALLOW up Jonah. And Jonah was in the BELLY of the fish three days and three nights.

Fight or flight is something we all have experienced. Usually it is in the face of danger or fear. Consider an ancient listener of this story for a moment. If you have read the introduction to this study, you know that the city of Nineveh was part of the Assyrian nation, and that the Assyrians became infamous enemies to Israel. They conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and dispersed

them into surrounding nations. That's not all. They were known for their brutality. Reliefs have been found characterizing Assyrian exploits, including flaying the flesh off their enemies and hanging the skin from walls. From the reader's perspective, God has commanded Jonah to go to their brutal enemy, and declare that their evil is bringing God's wrath. What would an ancient Israelite be thinking at this point? How do you feel about it?

Story REFLECTIONS.

1. Name some other prophets from the Old Testament. How are other prophetic books similar and different from Jonah?
2. Jonah has a choice in front of him. In your own words, describe what is being asked of him and what he is choosing to do. What statement is Jonah making based upon this choice?
3. Have you ever run in the opposite direction from something you were asked to do by God or someone else? Why? What were the consequences?
4. In verse 12, we hear Jonah's solution to the fears of the sailors. Is Jonah being sacrificial? What's his motivation? What does this say about Jonah's attitude toward God's original request? How did the sailors respond to Jonah?

Choices **AHEAD.**

Many of **OUR LIVES ARE FULL. WE ARE EXPECTED TO MAKE DECISIONS ALL THE TIME.** Sometimes those decisions are difficult, sometimes we only see a “lose-lose.” In fact, these are rarely singular decisions. They often are tangled up with other things like safety, family, finances, and our future. When these decisions press in, where do you go? Do you jump on the first ship to Tarshish, or do you lean into your King? God is a God on a mission. He desires to reconcile all things back to Himself, and the Bible makes it clear that His people are the primary means through which He accomplishes this task.

Is God calling you to something that you fear? Is He drawing you closer to Himself through a series of challenging moments?

If Jonah tells us anything, it is that God’s vision is **COSMIC**, and His voice calls out asking us to **TRUST** His vision which is not always safe, nor advantageous to us as individuals.

Confession time — In your group, identify one area in your life where you are avoiding what God wants you to do? Don’t stop there. Look at the cross, and know that His forgiveness is as big as His mission. Take a moment and receive that forgiveness. Speak it into each other’s situations. Pray together for His **POWER to be **FAITHFUL** and to **STRENGTHEN** each other in hard decisions.**



Belly *of the* BEAST

JONAH TWO

FIRST THOUGHTS

How do you feel about Jonah being in the belly of the fish? What do stories like this make you think about the truth of Scripture?

Why do you think the author used poetry for this section? How would you describe the tone of the poem?

Jonah's Prayer

²Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, ²saying,

"I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

³For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

⁴Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.'

⁵The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head

⁶ at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God.

⁷When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

⁸Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

⁹But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the Lord!"

¹⁰And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

“

*“I called out to the **LORD**,
out of my **DISTRESS**,
and he **ANSWERED** me;
out of the **BELLY** of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my **VOICE**.”*

The song that makes up this part of Jonah’s story is often overlooked. We see weird indenting and read words that seem flowery or symbolic and some of us turn off like we did after the ranting of that overly creative kid in school that would sing his answers to the teacher. What’s going on here? Well, we can’t lose track of Jonah 1:17—“The LORD appointed a great

fish to swallow Jonah.” The narrative points to Jonah crying out to the LORD after being swallowed. If we look closely, God was on the move before Jonah’s prayer. The fish, amazing as it may seem, revealed that God was already on the scene. He was already moving the story along. The song overflows with Jonah’s gratitude for God’s presence, the same presence Jonah was fleeing in the first place. The irony is inescapable.

Story REFLECTIONS.

1. What did Jonah deserve? Why? What did he do wrong?
2. After reading the psalm in Jonah 2, how would you describe Jonah's emotion and attitude? How is it different from Jonah 1?
3. From the context in Jonah 2:2, how would you define the term "sheol"? Now, read Genesis 37:35 and 1 Samuel 2:6. Based on those passages, how would you define "sheol"?
4. Compare Jonah 1:15 and 2:3. What is the difference between these two pictures of how the event happened? What does this reveal about Jonah's understanding of God?

5. Do you share Jonah's view of God's control over things? Why/why not? What makes you uncomfortable about God being in control? How might it comfort you?

6. Why do you think God saved Jonah? Why did He save Jonah in this unusual manner?

7. After being disobedient, and after suffering consequences, how does Jonah view his relationship with God? How does this compare with how you feel about your relationship with God when you fail?

Choices **AHEAD.**

SWALLOWED. God sends a beast from the deep to swallow the disobedient, both to rescue and to restore purpose. It's an uncomfortable thought.

Have you ever considered that the state you are in, like Jonah's, may have greater purpose? In those moments when we experience that sinking feeling, **ARE WE LOOKING FOR GOD'S FINGERPRINTS?**

Jonah saw them. In fact, it may be the only positive thing we can say about Jonah from the whole story. But wait. God sent Jonah for Nineveh and God sent a fish for Jonah.

This begs a different question . . . **AM I SOMEONE'S FISH?** Am I part of a heavenly message of rescue and repurposing to someone else? The gospel tells us of our rescue through the **BLOOD OF JESUS**, but we often forget the blessed **MISSION** that comes with it.

Consider the people at your work, at your typical hangout, or wherever you spend your time. Is God calling you to be an ACTIVE AGENT of rescue and repurposing in someone's life right now? Go through your mental contact list and share a name or two with your group. The simplest first step is getting to know a person's story. You may discover someone else sinking into the depths waiting on a "you-sized" fish to show GOD'S SAVING MERCY.



FIRST THOUGHTS

We don't know where Jonah was when God came to him the second time, but imagine the journey. Without a doubt, it was a multiple day trek to get there. What would be going through your mind during that long journey if you were Jonah? How would you feel?

How would you define repentance? What does it look like?

REPENTance

JONAH THREE



Jonah Goes to Nineveh

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”

³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The People of Nineveh Repent

⁶The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.



“

*Then the **WORD** of the **LORD** came to Jonah the second time, saying, “**ARISE**, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out **AGAINST** it the **MESSAGE** that I tell you.”*

So, at this point it seems Jonah’s back on track. Pause for a moment. Almost a quarter of the whole Bible is made up of books known as the Prophets. If looking at the Hebrew Tanakh (the Hebrew ordering of the Old Testament), even more would be considered from the Prophets. These crucial parts of Scripture reveal the historic failure of Israel to remain faithful to God’s

covenant. The Prophets were covenant watchdogs called to be God’s mouthpieces, declaring covenant blessings that were at risk and even the impending curse of God’s judgement. As we read through the book of Jonah, we have to ask the question, what are the actions, inactions, words, and attitudes of this prophet named Jonah revealing to us? Clearly, it has a different method and intent compared to the typical books of the Prophets.

Story REFLECTIONS.

1. Compare Jonah 1:13-16 and Jonah 3:5-9. How are the sailors and the Ninevites similar in their response? How do their actions compare with Jonah's actions so far?
2. Highlight the words "turn," "repent," and "relent" in Jonah 3. In each instance, who is the object of these verbs? What do you think of the idea of God "relenting"? How does it fit with your view of His character?
3. Read Exodus 32:11-14. This text describes what God was going to do because of the Golden Calf incident. Compare the story of the Israelites to the Ninevites in Jonah. Is God being consistent regardless of the subject of judgment?
4. Count how many words are in Jonah's proclamation. In Hebrew, it is five words. Why so few words? What does this tell us about what the author wants us to think? What does this tell us about Jonah? Considering the result, what does this reveal to us about God?

5. Read Matthew 11:20-24. Who are the unrepentant in the Matthew text? How does Jesus react to the unrepentant? What are the differences between the groups Jesus is comparing?

6. Read Luke 11:29-32. How is Jesus comparing Himself to Jonah? What kind of a “sign” is He?

7. In the same Lukan text, Jesus speaks of the “Queen of the South” (1 Kings 10:1-13) and the “men of Nineveh” (Jonah 3). What did they do that the current evil generation did not? How would you explain the language of “rise up at the judgment”?

8. Have you ever ignored something God impressed on you more than once? Explain.

Choices **AHEAD.**

Three main characters are present: **GOD, JONAH,** and the **NINEVITES.** Or, generically, God, a representative “believer,” and a representative “enemy.” God, through Jonah, calls the Ninevites on the carpet for their evil (Jonah 1:2).

From king to beast, yes, everything with a heartbeat was called to mourn, fast, and “turn” in the **HOPES** that God may also “turn,” which is exactly what happened. The entire story has a subtext that is inescapable.

Jonah got an opportunity to **REPENT.** Now Nineveh is given an **OPPORTUNITY** to repent, which literally leads to God repenting (the same Hebrew word for “turn” is used to describe both the Ninevites’ and God’s action). God is on a mission to bring all of **CREATION** back to Himself. He is offering an open door to all.

Have you walked through this door? Do you know someone who needs to? Sometimes the people inside the church have FORGOTTEN that His GRACE revealed an open door to them, for the purpose of revealing an open door to others. Think of it like divine chivalry. God holds a doorway to salvation open for us, teaching us to invite others through the same door. How can we be better at this kind of CHIVALRY? Who in our lives should we be leading to this door? Write them down. Pray for them as a group. Whether by fear or lack of concern, REPENT of your tendency to make them find it on their own.





Bitter or **BOUNTIFUL**

JONAH FOUR

FIRST THOUGHTS

Being perfectly honest, if you were in Jonah's shoes, how would you have responded after Jonah 3?

Consider all of the characters so far in the story. Who's the hero? Who's not looking great?

Jonah's Anger and the Lord's Compassion

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.² And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."³ Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."⁴ And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

⁵ Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.⁶ Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his

discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered.⁸ When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."¹⁰ And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night."¹¹ 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?"

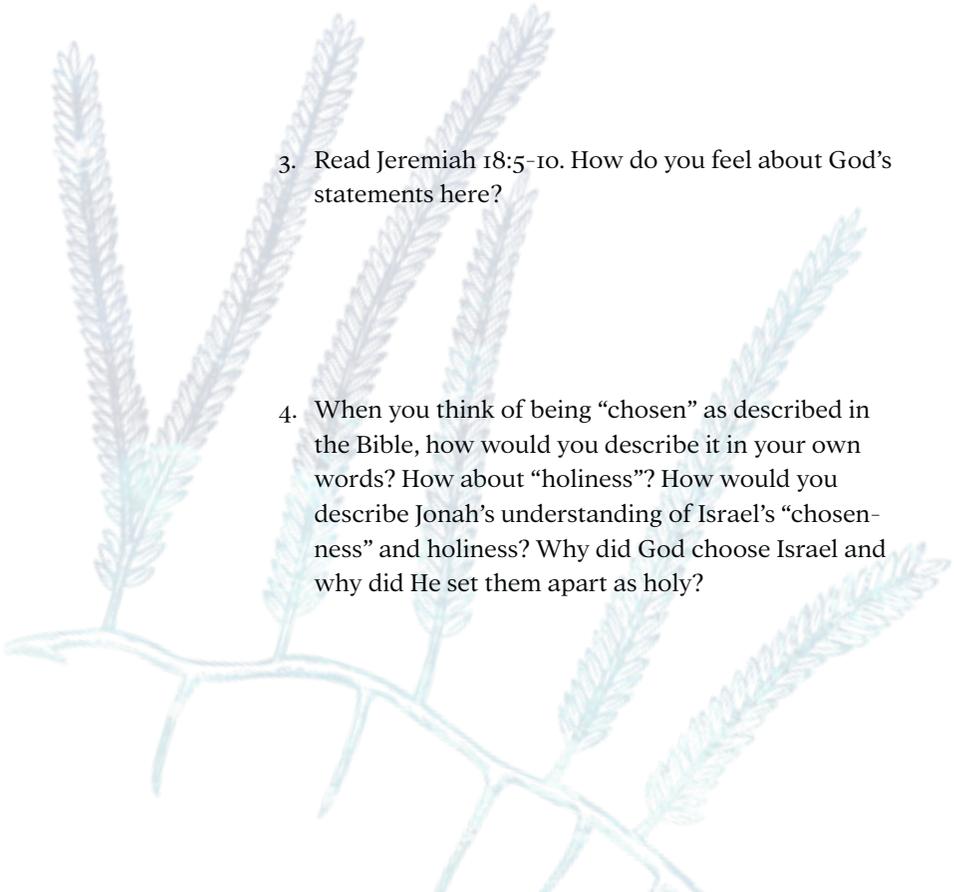
“
*And the Lord
said, “Do YOU
do WELL to be
ANGRY?”*”

The situation screams “madness!” Jonah is fuming. He is tail-spinning out of control, descending into his personal fit of rage at God, because God acted as expected, graciously and mercifully. God, on the other hand, has relented of His anger toward Nineveh because they repented. Do you

see the statement being made about Jonah? Can you feel the irony? God is on a mission to reconcile all of creation back to Himself, and the one person in the story who should be seen as God’s holy mouthpiece to a dying world, literally prefers death—first, death for his enemy, and if that won’t happen, death for himself.

Story REFLECTIONS.

1. Does Jonah know and trust God's character? Why is Jonah angry?
2. Compare Jonah 4:2 with Exodus 34:4-6. What parts of this character description does Jonah minimize?
3. Read Jeremiah 18:5-10. How do you feel about God's statements here?
4. When you think of being "chosen" as described in the Bible, how would you describe it in your own words? How about "holiness"? How would you describe Jonah's understanding of Israel's "chosenness" and holiness? Why did God choose Israel and why did He set them apart as holy?



Choices **AHEAD.**

REPENTANCE IS GOOD. BUT WHAT ABOUT WHEN YOUR ENEMY REPENTS? This is where human graciousness and Divine Grace can go in different directions.

The crazy thing is that something good like holiness—being set apart, being different like God is different—can take a dark turn. I must be different, turns into “I don’t want you to be different like me” or “you don’t deserve to be part of this crowd.”

Who is your NINEVEH? Who is the person (or group) that makes you BITTER at the thought of their success, happiness, or otherwise good graces?

No one wants to admit it, but maybe you are harboring racial prejudices. Maybe you have grown to hate a family member. Maybe you have grown to see members of the opposing political party as UNREDEEMABLE, UNLOVABLE enemies. Who is it that, if you are honest, you would rather see punished than RESCUED? We cannot forget Jesus’ words, “LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” It’s hard, but now is the time to CONFESS. Who are you hating? Let’s REPENT together for our bitter hearts, and seek God’s grace and hope for EVERY one who might call on HIS NAME.





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*When my **LIFE** was
FADING away,
I REMEMBERED
*the **LORD**, and my
PRAYER came
to you, into your
HOLY TEMPLE.**



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