



Rebellion to Restoration

Study Guide: Jonah

Jonah

Study Guide

Rebellion to Restoration
3 Studies
For Individuals or Groups

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CrossSites Bible Study

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{Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture verses are taken from the English Standard Version}

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Lesson One: Responding to God's Call

Bible Passage: [Jonah 1:1–2:9](#)

Big Idea: *God's relentless pursuit of His people invites us, even in our rebellion, to come back to Him and discover His divine purpose and grace, transforming our lives in ways we never imagined.*

Summary: Jonah's story is one of defiance against God's directive to preach to Nineveh, highlighting the struggle between personal desires and divine purpose. After fleeing and facing a storm that leads to his near-death experience in the sea, Jonah finds himself in the belly of a fish, where he reflects on his disobedience and ultimately turns back to God, recognizing the need for His mercy and intervention.

Opening Thought

There are moments when we know exactly what God is asking of us—and still our hearts pull in another direction. We hear His voice. We sense His leading. But fear, pride, hurt, or resentment begins to whisper that our way will be safer, easier, or less painful. So we take the direction we want, even when we know it is not the way He called us to go.

That is where Jonah found himself. God's call was clear, but Jonah's heart was resistant. The Lord sent him to Nineveh, and Jonah ran in the opposite direction. His flight carried him into a storm, down into the sea, and into the darkness of a great fish. Yet even there—in the place of fear, consequence, and helplessness—God was not finished with him.

Jonah's story reaches us because it is not only about a prophet who ran from God; it is about the mercy of a God who pursues His runaway servants. The Lord met Jonah in the storm, preserved him in the depths, and began leading him back—not to shame him, but to restore him. And that is the hope we bring into this lesson: even when we have wandered, resisted, or run, God's mercy is still able to find us, awaken us, and lead us home.

When God Calls and Our Hearts Resist

[Jonah 1:1-6](#)

1. ¹ Now 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.” ³ 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. ⁴ But 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's Known Ministry and New Assignment

Jonah was already known in Israel because of his earlier ministry. In [2 Kings 14:25](#), he had delivered God's promise that King Jeroboam would expand Israel's borders, and that word came to pass.

Now the Lord placed before Jonah a very different assignment. He was not being sent to encourage his own people, but to call a pagan nation to repentance. This mission required him to carry God's warning to

outsiders, and it exposed the resistance already forming in his heart. In verse 3, we are not simply watching a prophet travel in the wrong direction; we are watching a servant of God struggle against a call that revealed what he did not yet want to surrender.

Understanding Jonah's Fear and Resistance

Jonah's flight was shaped by more than personal stubbornness. Nineveh represented real danger, deep fear, and painful history. The Ninevites were known for brutal violence: they tortured and killed their enemies, displayed their bodies, and recorded their cruelty in images.

Yet Jonah's resistance went even deeper. He knew that if he preached God's warning, the people might repent—and God might forgive them. As a major Assyrian city, Nineveh was a genuine threat to Israel. If its people escaped judgment, they could one day rise against Jonah's own nation.

Nineveh's Power and Significance

[Genesis 10:11-12](#) traces Nineveh's beginnings back to Nimrod, reminding us that this was no small village on the edge of history. Nineveh was a great and powerful city with a long record of influence.

- At its height, Nineveh stretched nearly eight miles around.
- By about 1363 B.C., it had become a major city-state.
- Around 700 B.C., Sennacherib made it Assyria's royal capital.
- Though the city fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C., discoveries such as King Ashurbanipal's library still testify to its power, culture, and significance.

When God sent Jonah there, He was sending him into the heart of a powerful enemy—and into a place where only God's mercy could make obedience possible.

A Prophet Afraid of Mercy

So Jonah fled to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. The prophet once known for delivering God's victorious word to Jeroboam now became a runaway—afraid not only of Nineveh's cruelty, but also of what God's mercy might mean for people he did not want to see restored.

When the Heart Grows Spiritually Drowsy

As a prophet, Jonah should have known that no one can escape the Lord's presence. Yet when God's word came to him, he treated it as something he could accept, delay, or ignore. Convinced he could flee without consequence, Jonah went down into the ship, lay down, and fell asleep.

But the Lord loved Jonah too much to leave him asleep in disobedience. The storm gathering around him was not random punishment; it was God's severe mercy, sent to awaken him and redirect him back to his calling.

Gentle Ways We Drift from God

Many believers still try to run from God's presence, often in quiet and gradual ways. We may skip worship, neglect Scripture, stop praying, or withdraw from the accountability of other believers. Over time, those small steps can become a larger drift from God.

We may tell ourselves everything is fine because the seas seem calm. Yet in mercy, the Lord may allow a storm to awaken us, redirect us, and bring us back to Himself. His purpose is not to crush His children, but to restore them.

When Mercy Meets Us in the Storm

[Jonah 1:7-17](#)

2. 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. 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.

The Storm Exposes What Was Hidden

The storm had become so fierce that the sailors recognized something more than ordinary weather was taking place. In fear, they cast lots to discover whose guilt had brought this danger upon them. In the ancient world, casting lots was often used in moments of crisis to seek guidance, as seen in [1 Samuel 14:41–45](#).

Though the sailors did not yet know the Lord, God was already using the storm to bring hidden sin into the light and to begin revealing Himself to everyone on the ship.

Jonah’s Confession and Contradiction

When the lot fell on Jonah, the sailors pressed him to explain who he was and why this calamity had come. Jonah answered honestly: he was a Hebrew who feared the Lord, “*the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land*” ([Jonah 1:9](#)).

His confession exposed the sorrowful contradiction in his heart. Jonah knew the Lord, and he knew the Lord ruled the very sea beneath him. Yet he had been running from the One he claimed to fear.

How Hidden Sin Can Burden Others

As the storm grew stronger, Jonah began to face the seriousness of his rebellion. [Proverbs 15:13](#) reminds us that “*the eyes of the Lord are in every place*,” yet Jonah had tried to flee from the God who made “*the sea and the dry land*” ([Jonah 1:9](#)).

He told the sailors to throw him into the sea because he understood that his sin was endangering them. Like Achan in [Joshua 7](#), Jonah’s private disobedience was hurting more than himself.

Yet even in this painful exposure, God’s mercy was at work. The Lord was not merely uncovering Jonah’s sin; He was beginning to turn Jonah’s heart outward toward the lives of others.

The Sailors Encounter the Lord

The sailors did not quickly cast Jonah into the sea. They labored at the oars, trying to bring the ship safely back to land. But the storm would not give way, because *“the Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all”* ([Psalm 103:19](#)).

Finally, they cried out to Jonah’s God, confessing, *“you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you”* ([Jonah 1:14](#)). When they put Jonah into the sea, the waters became calm, reminding us that the Lord rules and stills the raging waters ([Psalm 89:9](#)).

Their terror turned into reverent worship, and they offered sacrifice and made vows to the Lord ([Jonah 1:16](#)). In tender mercy, God used Jonah’s failure to reveal Himself to men who had not known Him before.

Preserved in the Depths

We do not know how long Jonah struggled in the sea before the Lord appointed—or provided—a great fish to swallow him. But even in the darkness of the deep, Jonah was not beyond the reach of God’s mercy.

The Lord who *“made the sea”* ([Jonah 1:9](#)) also ruled every creature within it, directing the fish to receive His runaway servant. What looked like judgment was also preservation. God did not send the fish to destroy Jonah, but to keep him alive, bring him low, and prepare his heart for prayer.

The Sign of Jonah and the Hope of Christ

Jonah’s *three days and three nights* in the fish become more than a detail in the story. Jesus later called it *“the sign of the prophet Jonah,”* using Jonah’s time in the depths to point to His own burial for *“three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* ([Matthew 12:39–40](#)).

Here we begin to see the mercy of God shine even through Jonah’s descent: the place that looked like death became a place of preservation, and it points us forward to Christ, who would enter death itself and rise again to bring life to His people.

Discipline as Mercy

This is a tender reminder that God still disciplines the people He loves. His correction is never careless or cruel, and it does not mean He has rejected us.

At times, He allows us to feel the weight of our choices. At other times, He intervenes more directly to stop us, awaken us, and draw us back to Himself. Hebrews describes the Lord’s discipline as the loving correction of a faithful Father, given for our good so that we may share in His holiness ([Hebrews 12:7–11](#)). In His hands, even discipline becomes mercy, because He uses it to restore His children and lead them back to life.

God’s Mercy Is at Work Even in the Storm

This passage reminds us that God’s intervention is never random. He exposes what is hidden, confronts what is harmful, and even uses storms to draw people toward Himself.

- Jonah’s rebellion could not cancel God’s mercy.
- The sailors’ ignorance could not keep them beyond God’s reach.
- The storm itself became a means of awakening, preservation, and revelation.

In the same way, the Lord may use painful moments to awaken us, preserve us, and point us again to Christ, whose saving work brings life out of death.

When God Hears Us from the Depths

[Jonah 2:1-9](#)

3. ¹ Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying, “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. ³ For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your breakers and your waves passed over me. ⁴ Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ ⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head. ⁶ To 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. ⁷ When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. ⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. ⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

Crying Out from the Depths

Inside the fish, Jonah prayed and described his distress as being “*in the belly of Sheol*” ([Jonah 2:2](#)). He was reaching for the language of death itself—the realm Israel associated with darkness, dust, and separation. Jonah was not simply uncomfortable; he felt buried beneath the weight of his disobedience and brought near to death. Yet even from that place, his cry reached the Lord. God’s mercy met him in the depths, reminding us that no darkness is too deep for the Lord to hear His people and begin bringing them back.

Repentance Begins with Dependence

Jonah’s prayer gently shows where true repentance often begins in darkness, helplessness, and dependence. His cry joins the testimony of those who say, “*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord*” ([Psalm 130:1–2](#)) and “*In my distress I called upon the Lord*” ([Psalm 18:6](#)).

Even in the belly of the great fish, Jonah discovered that God’s mercy had not abandoned him. His prayer became a turning point, moving him from self-reliance to surrender until he could confess, “*salvation belongs to the Lord*” ([Jonah 2:9](#); [Psalm 3:8](#)).

The Greater Hope in Christ

Jonah’s deliverance points us to the greater hope found in Christ, whose death and resurrection secure the restoration Jonah only began to taste ([Matthew 12:39–40](#); [Romans 6:4](#)).

Because of Christ, every crisis becomes an invitation to turn toward the Lord rather than away from Him. We can trust that His mercy restores our hearts, renews our purpose, and brings “*times of refreshing*” from His presence ([Acts 3:19](#)).

Mercy That Restores and Renews

Jonah’s prayer tenderly reminds us that God’s mercy reaches His people even in the deepest places. In love, He brings to light what needs to change, draws us back when we have wandered, and uses even dark seasons to awaken repentance and deepen our dependence on Him.

- He hears His people when they cry from the depths.
- He restores hearts that have drifted from Him.
- He renews the calling of those who turn back in repentance.

The Lord does not waste our distress. He meets us there, points us to the greater deliverance found in Christ, and gives us hope that the God who heard Jonah still hears, restores, and renews His people today.

Application

The Lord has not saved us merely to keep us safe, comfortable, or accepted by others. In His grace, He saves us, restores us, and gently invites us to share in His mission. Sometimes that calling leads us into places that feel difficult, relationships that feel tender, or steps of obedience that make us feel unsure. Yet He does not send us alone. He goes before us, walks with us, and strengthens us with the mercy He has already shown us in Christ.

So this week, take one honest and grace-filled step back toward the Lord. You might pray, as Jonah did from the depths, *“Lord, I have been running, but I am turning back to You.”* Then, with His help, name one place where obedience has been delayed—a conversation, an apology, a ministry step, a surrender, or a renewed commitment. Do not begin with shame. Begin with His mercy, and let that mercy give you courage to say yes.

Discussion Questions

Use these questions to help the group move from observation to honest reflection and practical response.

1. Where do you see Jonah’s fear, reluctance, or resistance in this opening passage?
2. Are there gentle ways we can recognize our own reluctance to follow God’s call?
3. What was Jonah's state of mind while he was in the belly of the fish?
4. How does Jonah’s prayer from the depths encourage us when we feel far from God?
5. What is one grace-filled step you can take this week to turn toward God’s purposes?

Lesson Two: Repentance: The Key to Restoration

Bible Passage: [Jonah 2:9-3:10](#)

Big Idea: Repentance opens the door to divine restoration, inviting both personal and communal transformation through the grace of God, and emphasizing that God is always ready to restore the brokenhearted.

Summary: In this passage, Jonah finds himself in the depths of despair inside the fish, where he remembers God and cries out for help. His prayer of repentance signifies a turning away from his previous rebellion against God's command. After his repentance, God commands the fish to release Jonah, allowing him to fulfill his prophetic calling to Nineveh. The citizens of Nineveh respond to Jonah's message with heartfelt repentance, demonstrating the transformative power of acknowledging one's sin before God.

Opening Thoughts

Jonah is at the lowest point of his journey—hidden in the belly of the fish, humbled by his rebellion, and surrounded by darkness. Yet even there, he is not beyond God's mercy. In desperation, he remembers the Lord and cries out for help. His prayer becomes more than regret; it marks a turning point where resistance begins to yield to repentance and renewed obedience.

Jonah's story reminds us that God does not cast aside His servants when they fail. He corrects, restores, and calls them back to the work He has prepared. The mercy that lifted Jonah from the deep also reached Nineveh. When the people heard God's warning, they humbled themselves and turned from sin. Their response shows that no heart is too hard, no failure too final, and no person or community too far gone for God's restoring grace.

Jonah's Grateful Turnaround

[Jonah 2:9-10](#)

4. ⁹ *But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!"* ¹⁰ *And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.*

Mercy in the Depths

From inside the great fish, Jonah turned back to the Lord. Humbled by the bitter fruit of his disobedience, he cried out for mercy from the depths. In that place of helplessness, he confessed the hope every sinner need: "Salvation is from the Lord!" ([Jonah 2:9](#)). Even there, in the deep, Jonah was not beyond the reach of God's mercy.

Restored to Solid Ground

The Lord answered Jonah with grace. He commanded the fish to release him onto dry land, lifting him from the depths and placing his feet once more on solid ground. Scripture does not tell us where Jonah landed, but it makes one thing clear: God was not finished with him.

This is comforting for weary saints. Even after failure, the Lord can restore, redirect, and recommission His people. He knows how to bring His children back—not merely to useful service, but to renewed fellowship with Himself.

Corrected by a Faithful Father

Jonah received another opportunity to obey, though his rebellion had not been painless. It cost him time, strength, and sorrow. Yet even in discipline, the Lord was kindly calling him back.

God's correction is never cruel. It is the hand of a faithful Father drawing His child away from danger and back into the way of life. When the Lord calls us to obedience, He does not reshape His character or His Word around our desires. In steadfast love, He invites us to yield, trust, and follow. The gentler and wiser path is always to say yes to God from the beginning.

Mercy That Points to Christ

God's mercy to Jonah was never meant to point only to Jonah. The Lord sent a fish to spare one drowning prophet, but in far greater mercy He sent His Son, Jesus, to rescue sinners from death itself.

Everyone who trusts in Christ is met with this compassionate grace: lifted from distress, forgiven of sin, made new, and given life that cannot be taken away. *"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us... made us alive together with Christ"* ([Ephesians 2:4–5](#)). Such mercy should soften our hearts, deepen our worship, and fill us with humble gratitude.

If the Lord has restored us, we can walk forward with hope—not because we are strong, but because His grace is faithful. Jonah's restoration prepares us for the next movement in the story: the God who brought His servant back from the depths now sends him again with a word of mercy for others.

Jonah's Renewed Mission

[Jonah 3:1-4](#)

5. ¹ 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." ³ So 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. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Restored and Recommissioned

When Jonah stood again on dry land, the Lord did not meet him with harshness, but with tender mercy. The God who had pursued him through discipline now restored him by grace. Though Jonah had failed, the Lord did not cast him aside. Instead, He graciously repeated the call: go to Nineveh and speak the word I have given you.

This brings comfort to every weary believer: our failures do not have to be the end of our usefulness. In mercy, the Lord restores His people, steadies their hearts, and gently calls them back into obedience.

A Warning Filled with Mercy

Jonah obeyed the Lord and made his way to Nineveh, one of the great cities of his time. Ancient writers described it as vast, with one estimate placing its circumference at about fifty-five miles. For three days Jonah walked its streets, carrying a message that was both sobering and merciful: "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown" ([Jonah 3:4](#)).

The warning was brief, yet it revealed the compassionate heart of God. Nineveh's sin had come under judgment, but the Lord, in mercy, gave the city time to turn from wickedness and seek Him. Even God's warnings are gracious when they call sinners away from ruin and toward repentance.

The Power Belongs to the Word

When the Lord calls us to speak His Word, we may feel weak, afraid, or exposed. Yet Nineveh reminds us that the power does not rest in the messenger, but in the Word of God itself. His Word is living and active, able to pierce the heart and awaken repentance ([Heb. 4:12](#)).

So we speak with humble confidence—not because we are eloquent or strong, but because the gospel of Jesus Christ carries the power of God to save. The Lord delights to use frail servants so that His mercy is seen, His Word is honored, and His glory belongs to Him alone.

But God's mercy does not stop with the sending of the messenger; it is displayed even more wonderfully in the response of those who hear. Jonah entered Nineveh with a warning, and what follows shows how deeply God's Word can humble a people when He opens their hearts.

Nineveh's Humble Repentance

[Jonah 3:5-10](#)

6. ⁵ *And 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. ⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ And 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, ⁸ but 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. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." ¹⁰ When 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.*

A Serious Warning Received with Humility

The people of Nineveh heard Jonah's warning and took it seriously. By God's mercy, His Word did more than reach their ears; it pierced their hearts. From the greatest to the least, they humbled themselves before the Lord, recognizing that judgment was real and that mercy was their only hope.

Even the king stepped down from his throne, removed his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. His response gives us a vivid picture of repentance: no excuses, no bargaining, and no effort to protect his pride—only a humble admission that sin had placed the city under God's warning and that only God's compassion could save them.

The Kindness of Repentance

Their fasting and sackcloth were outward signs of an inward turning. The whole city confessed by its actions that it had no hope apart from God's mercy. This is still the kindness of repentance: God awakens us to the seriousness of sin, not to drive us into despair, but to draw us back to Himself.

When His Word exposes what is wrong in us, He is not being cruel; He is rescuing us from the path of destruction. So this passage calls us tenderly and urgently: do not harden your heart when God confronts you. Do not hide behind status, excuses, religious appearance, or past failure. Come low before the Lord. Turn from sin. Cry out for mercy.

True Repentance Seen by God

God saw the repentance of the Ninevites and their king. He sees not only outward actions, but also the thoughts and motives of the heart. The Lord was pleased with their humble turning, because true repentance is more than a passing feeling of regret or remorse.

As a child, I was often sorry when a parent or teacher caught me doing wrong, but sometimes my sorrow was only about being caught or facing punishment. That was regret, but it was not true repentance. The Ninevites showed genuine repentance by turning from their evil ways. And because they repented, God relented. He spared them and did not bring the disaster He had warned would come.

The God who saw Nineveh's repentance is the same God who delights to show mercy to all who come to Him humbly. In Christ, we see that mercy most clearly: God not only spares the repentant; He forgives, restores, and gives new life through the Savior who bore judgment in the place of sinners.

Application

Sometimes believers can quietly begin to think of the God of the Old Testament as stern and distant, and the God revealed in the New Testament as loving and compassionate. But Jonah gently corrects that misunderstanding. The Lord has always been the same: holy in His opposition to sin, yet rich in mercy toward those who turn to Him. This should comfort us. When God confronts our sin, He is not pushing us away; He is inviting us back. And when we come to Him through faith in Christ, we find the grace, forgiveness, and mercy our hearts most deeply need. Having received such good news, we are then called to carry it with tenderness and hope to others who also need the restoring mercy of God.

Discussion Questions

Use these questions to help the group move from observation to honest reflection and practical response.

7. How can the idea of repentance seen in the people of Nineveh encourage us in our own walks with Christ?
8. As you reflect on Jonah's journey, in what ways do you see parallels to your own spiritual struggles and growth?
9. How can we apply the lesson of listening and responding to God's call in our daily lives, like Jonah eventually did?
10. What areas of your life do you feel God is calling you to 'repent' or turn around, similar to the Ninevites?
11. What practical steps can we take in our communities to share the message of repentance and hope, as Jonah did in Nineveh?

Lesson Three: When God's Grace Meets Our Anger

Bible Passage: [Jonah 4:1–11](#)

Big Idea: God's grace challenges our anger and prejudices, calling us to a deeper understanding of His unconditional love.

Summary: This passage describes Jonah's anger towards God for showing mercy to Nineveh, highlighting his struggle with God's grace and compassion for those he deemed unworthy.

Opening Thoughts

[Jonah 4](#) brings us to one of the most searching moments in the book. The storm has passed, the fish has released Jonah, the message has been preached, and Nineveh has repented. From one perspective, the story should end with celebration. A rebellious prophet has been restored enough to speak God's word, and a wicked city has been spared by God's mercy.

But instead of ending with joy, the book turns inward. Jonah is not angry because the mission failed; he is angry because it succeeded. The grace that rescued him is now reaching people he does not want to see forgiven. In this final chapter, God exposes not only Jonah's anger, but the narrowness of a heart that has received mercy while struggling to extend it.

That makes [Jonah 4](#) deeply personal. The chapter does more than describe Jonah's reaction; it invites us to examine our own. Where do our hearts resist God's compassion? Whom would we rather see judged than restored? What comforts do we protect more fiercely than we pursue mercy? And where do we know the truth about God while still struggling to share His heart?

As we listen to the Lord's questions to Jonah, we are invited to hear His questions to us. God is gracious enough not only to save sinners, but also to shepherd the hearts of His servants. He meets our anger with patience, exposes our prejudice with mercy, and confronts our resistance with compassion large enough to remake us.

Jonah's Furious Outburst

[Jonah 4:1-3](#)

12. ¹ 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."

Mercy Exposes the Heart

Jonah's story becomes a mirror for us because mercy always reveals the heart. We may believe in mercy, sing about mercy, preach mercy, and thank God for mercy. Yet the test often comes when God is merciful to people we find difficult to love, or when grace reaches someone we believe should have been judged.

[Jonah 4:1–3](#) confronts us with an uncomfortable possibility: we may love the mercy of God for ourselves while resisting that same mercy when it reaches others.

Anger Reveals Resistance

Verse 1 says, *“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.”* The word “but” is important because it stands in contrast to the mercy God has just shown Nineveh. God relented from disaster, but Jonah was displeased. God spared the city, but Jonah was angry. The heart of God moved toward compassion, while Jonah’s heart moved toward resentment.

Anger often reveals a collision between what we want and what God is doing. Jonah wanted Nineveh judged; God showed Nineveh mercy. Jonah wanted the story to end with destruction; God wrote a story of repentance and grace. Jonah’s anger shows that he was not merely struggling with Nineveh—he was struggling with God.

This is a sobering warning. Sometimes our deepest anger is not only about circumstances, people, or outcomes. Sometimes it reveals that we are resisting the wisdom and mercy of God. We may not say it that way, but our frustration can expose a heart that wants God to act according to our preferences rather than according to His character.

When we become angry at the mercy God shows to others, we should ask what that anger is protecting:

- Pride?
- Bitterness?
- A desire to see someone pay?

The Lord may be using our anger to reveal a place where our hearts are out of step with His compassion.

True Doctrine Must Shape the Heart

In verse 2, Jonah prays to the Lord and explains why he fled to Tarshish. In effect, he says, *“This is exactly what I knew You would do.”* Jonah did not run because he thought God was cruel. He ran because he knew God was gracious. He knew the Lord was merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and willing to relent from disaster.

That confession is theologically rich but spiritually tragic. Jonah’s words are true, but his heart is cold. He can recite the attributes of God while resenting their application. He knows the vocabulary of grace, but he does not share the joy of grace. He understands God’s mercy as doctrine, but resists it in practice.

This is possible for us too. We can know sound doctrine and still have unsundered hearts. We can affirm that God is gracious while struggling to be gracious. We can celebrate forgiveness in worship while withholding forgiveness in relationships. Jonah reminds us that knowing true things about God must lead us to become more like God.

The question is not only whether we can describe God’s mercy, but whether we are being shaped by it. If we truly know the Lord as gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, that knowledge should soften our speech, humble our judgments, and enlarge our compassion.

Self-Centeredness Makes Grace Feel Offensive

In verse 3, Jonah says, *“Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”* These are heavy words. Jonah would rather die than live in a world where God shows mercy to Nineveh. His despair is not rooted in personal suffering alone; it is rooted in the fact that God did not act the way Jonah wanted Him to act.

That is the danger of a self-centered heart. When our desires become ultimate, God’s mercy can feel like an offense. When our sense of justice is separated from God’s compassion, we can become hard toward

the very people God is pursuing. Jonah's despair reveals how small life becomes when self, preference, and resentment sit at the center.

God Is Patient with Resistant Hearts

Yet even Jonah's desperate prayer is spoken to the Lord. That matters. Jonah is angry, but he is still talking to God. He is wrong, but he is not beyond the reach of grace. The Lord will continue to engage him, question him, and teach him. God's patience with Jonah is itself an act of mercy.

If your heart is angry, bitter, or weary, bring it honestly to the Lord. Do not pretend before Him. But also do not assume that your feelings are always telling you the truth. Let God meet you in your honesty and then reshape you by His mercy.

Mercy for Nineveh—and for Jonah

[Jonah 4:1–3](#) shows us a man who knows God's mercy but struggles to love it when it reaches his enemies. It shows us how anger can expose a heart out of step with God, how doctrine can be true in our mouths but resisted in our attitudes, and how self-centeredness can make grace feel offensive.

But this passage also shows us the patience of God. The Lord listens to Jonah's complaint. He does not cast him away. He draws near to confront, correct, and continue the work of grace in him. That is hope for every one of us. God's mercy is not only for Nineveh. It is also for angry prophets, resistant hearts, and people who still need to be made tender.

God's Tender Question

[Jonah 4:4-8](#)

13. 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."

Outward Obedience and Inward Resistance

Jonah is no longer running from Nineveh, but he is still wrestling with God. His feet have stopped running, yet his heart remains resistant. He has delivered the message, but he has not learned to rejoice in the mercy that stood behind the message.

This passage reminds us that we can obey God outwardly while still struggling inwardly with His heart. The Lord does not crush Jonah in his anger. He questions him, teaches him, exposes him, and patiently draws the condition of his heart into the light.

For that reason, [Jonah 4:4–8](#) is not only about Jonah's anger; it is also about ours. It asks what happens when God is more merciful than we want Him to be, when His compassion reaches people we would rather see judged, and when He removes comforts we have quietly begun to depend on.

The Lord's question is simple but piercing: Is our anger aligned with His righteousness, or is it protecting our pride, comfort, and desire for control?

God Questions Jonah's Anger

The Lord asks Jonah, *"Do you do well to be angry?"* The question is brief, but it reaches deep. God does not begin by arguing with Jonah or explaining Himself. He asks a question that forces Jonah to look inward. There is grace in the way God confronts him. The Lord is not asking because He lacks information; He is asking because Jonah lacks self-awareness. God wants Jonah to consider whether his anger is right, holy, and consistent with the heart of the One he claims to serve.

Anger often opens a window into the heart. It can reveal what we love, fear, think we deserve, or want to control. Some anger is righteous, but much of it grows from wounded pride, disappointed expectations, or resistance to God. The Lord loves Jonah enough to question what is ruling him, and He loves us the same way.

When anger rises within us, we should not only ask, *"What happened to me?"* We should also ask, *"What is God revealing in me?"* The very thing that frustrates us may be the place where the Lord is bringing mercy, correction, and healing.

Near God's Work but Far from God's Heart

Jonah leaves the city, sits east of it, builds a booth, and waits to see what will happen. It is a heartbreaking picture: he is close enough to watch God's work, but not close enough to share God's heart.

This warns every servant of God. We can be involved in ministry and still be unmoved by mercy. We can speak truth and still lack tenderness. We can be near sermons, songs, prayers, meetings, and mission, while our hearts remain cold toward the people God is pursuing.

Jonah seems to be waiting to see whether judgment might still fall. The mercy that saved him from the depths is the same mercy he resents when it reaches Nineveh. This becomes painfully personal: we often love grace when it comes to us, but struggle when it reaches people we think do not deserve it.

The question is not only whether we are doing the work of God, but whether the heart of God is being formed in us. The Lord desires more than reluctant obedience; He desires hearts softened by the mercy that saved them.

The Plant, the Worm, and Misplaced Affection

The Lord appoints a plant to grow over Jonah and give him shade. This gift brings real relief, and Jonah is *"exceedingly glad"* because of it. Yet this is the first time Jonah is described this way—not because Nineveh repented, and not because lives were spared, but because his discomfort was eased.

God's kindness in giving the plant is real. He cares for Jonah's weakness and provides shade for a prophet whose heart is still hard. But the plant is also a teaching tool. God uses Jonah's joy over temporary comfort to reveal his lack of compassion for eternal souls.

Then God appoints a worm, and the plant withers. The same sovereign God who gives comfort also permits loss. Both the gift and its removal belong to His wise and loving instruction. God is showing Jonah how quickly joy collapses when it rests on temporary comforts rather than on the Lord Himself.

God's blessings are meant to lead us to the Giver, not replace Him. Sometimes the Lord allows the plant to grow, and sometimes He allows it to wither. In both seasons, He teaches us what we love most and where our security truly rests.

When Comfort Becomes Ultimate

When the sun rises, God appoints a scorching east wind. The shade is gone, the heat is intense, and Jonah grows faint. Once again, he says, *“It is better for me to die than to live.”* His words reveal how fragile the heart becomes when comfort, control, and personal preference become ultimate things.

Jonah’s reaction is severe, but not unfamiliar. When something we depend on is removed, our response can reveal how deeply we were depending on it. Jonah is more grieved over the loss of a plant than moved by the possible destruction of a city. His pain is real, but his perspective is distorted.

Yet God is not finished with Jonah. The heat, the wind, and the withered plant are not signs of abandonment; they are part of God’s patient instruction. His exposing work can be painful, but it is also loving. He wounds our pride to heal our souls.

Let God Search What Anger Reveals

[Jonah 4:4–8](#) reminds us that God is not only concerned with the mission we complete, but with the heart we carry while completing it. The Lord lovingly confronts anger, exposes misplaced affections, and invites His people to share His compassion.

- **When anger rises**, ask what it reveals about your heart.
- **When comfort is removed**, ask whether it had become too central.
- **When mercy reaches someone difficult**, ask God to make your heart more like His.

God's Compassionate Challenge

[Jonah 4:9-11](#)

14. 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?”

Anger Reveals What We Treasure

There are moments when the things that upset us also reveal us. At first, our frustration may seem to be about inconvenience, fairness, people, timing, or loss. But beneath the surface, anger often exposes what we love, protect, or fear losing most.

Jonah is remembered for running from God, being preserved in the fish, and preaching in Nineveh. Yet the book does not end with revival in the city. It ends with Jonah outside the city, angry beneath a dying plant, while a merciful God patiently speaks to him.

Jonah had received mercy in the deep, but he struggled to welcome mercy in Nineveh. He was grateful when God spared him, yet angry when God spared them. Even then, the Lord does not crush Jonah or cast him aside. Instead, He comes near, reasons with him, and invites him to see with the heart of God.

God Questions Misplaced Pity

“Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” God’s question is tender, but it reaches deeply. The Lord is not asking because He lacks information; He is asking because Jonah lacks self-awareness.

Jonah feels certain that his anger is justified, so he answers, “*Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.*” Anger can feel righteous simply because it feels strong, but strong emotions are not always holy emotions.

Jonah is grieved over the loss of a plant that shaded him, yet unmoved by a city full of people who needed mercy. His personal discomfort weighs heavier on him than their spiritual need.

God’s question comes to us as well: *Do you do well to be angry?* The question is not whether anger sometimes rises within us. The question is whether our anger reflects the heart of God.

Temporary Comforts and Eternal Souls

The Lord says, “*You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow.*” Jonah cared about the plant because it served him. It made life easier, shaded his head, and relieved his discomfort. His concern was real, but it was tied more to convenience than to compassion.

This is one of the searching lessons of the passage: our hearts can become deeply attached to temporary comforts while remaining strangely distant from eternal souls. We can grieve what makes life easier while overlooking the people around us who need mercy.

The plant “*came into being in a night and perished in a night.*” It was fragile, temporary, and never Jonah’s creation. Yet when it withered, Jonah’s emotional world collapsed. God is showing him the contrast: if Jonah can feel sorrow over a temporary plant he did not create, should the Lord not feel compassion for people He made?

The Larger Compassion of God

“*And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city?*” The book of Jonah ends with this question hanging in the air. The Lord does not record Jonah’s answer because the question is meant to search us too.

Nineveh was a great city, and it was also a wicked city. Its repentance did not erase its past, but it did reveal the generosity of God’s mercy. God saw more than the city’s violence. He saw confusion, blindness, need, and vulnerability. He saw a city Jonah wanted judged, and He asked, “*Should I not pity?*”

The heart of God is larger than Jonah’s categories. He cares for the prophet, the pagan sailors, the repentant Ninevites, and even the animals in the city. His compassion is wide and generous. His mercy did not fit inside Jonah’s resentment, and it will not fit inside ours either.

Standing Before Mercy

Jonah’s story ends with a question, not an answer: “*Should not I pity Nineveh?*” God leaves the prophet standing before mercy, and now the question stands before us.

- **Will we cling to our plants,** or will we share the compassion of God for the city?
- **Will we resent grace,** or will we remember that we too are undeserving people reached by grace?
- **Will we protect our comfort,** or will we ask God to give us His heart for the people around us?

God is patient with angry prophets. He is merciful to rebellious cities. He is compassionate toward confused and needy people. And in Jesus Christ, we see the full measure of that compassion. The Son of God did not sit outside the city hoping sinners would be destroyed. He went outside the city to die for sinners so they could be saved.

Application

First, we must let God question our anger. Before defending our resentment, we should bring it into the presence of the Lord and ask whether it is aligned with His heart. Some anger is a burden for righteousness, but some anger is wounded pride, selfish comfort, or prejudice dressed in spiritual language.

Second, we must examine what we pity. What breaks our hearts? What receives our attention, energy, and grief? If we are more moved by inconvenience than by lostness, or more concerned about comfort than compassion, then Jonah's plant has something to teach us.

Finally, we must rejoice when God shows mercy. The mercy that saved us is the same mercy God extends to others. We do not honor grace by trying to restrict it. We honor grace by receiving it humbly and extending it gladly.

Discussion Questions

Use these questions to help the group move from observation to honest reflection and practical response.

1. Jonah was angry because God showed mercy to Nineveh. What does Jonah's reaction reveal about the difference between knowing God's mercy and sharing God's heart?
2. The text says mercy often exposes the heart. Can you think of a time when God's kindness to someone else challenged your own attitude?
3. God asks Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry?" How can that question help us evaluate whether our anger is righteous or self-protective?
4. Who are the "Ninevites" we may struggle to see with compassion—people we would rather avoid, judge, or dismiss?
5. What is one practical way this week to let God soften your heart toward someone who needs mercy?

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